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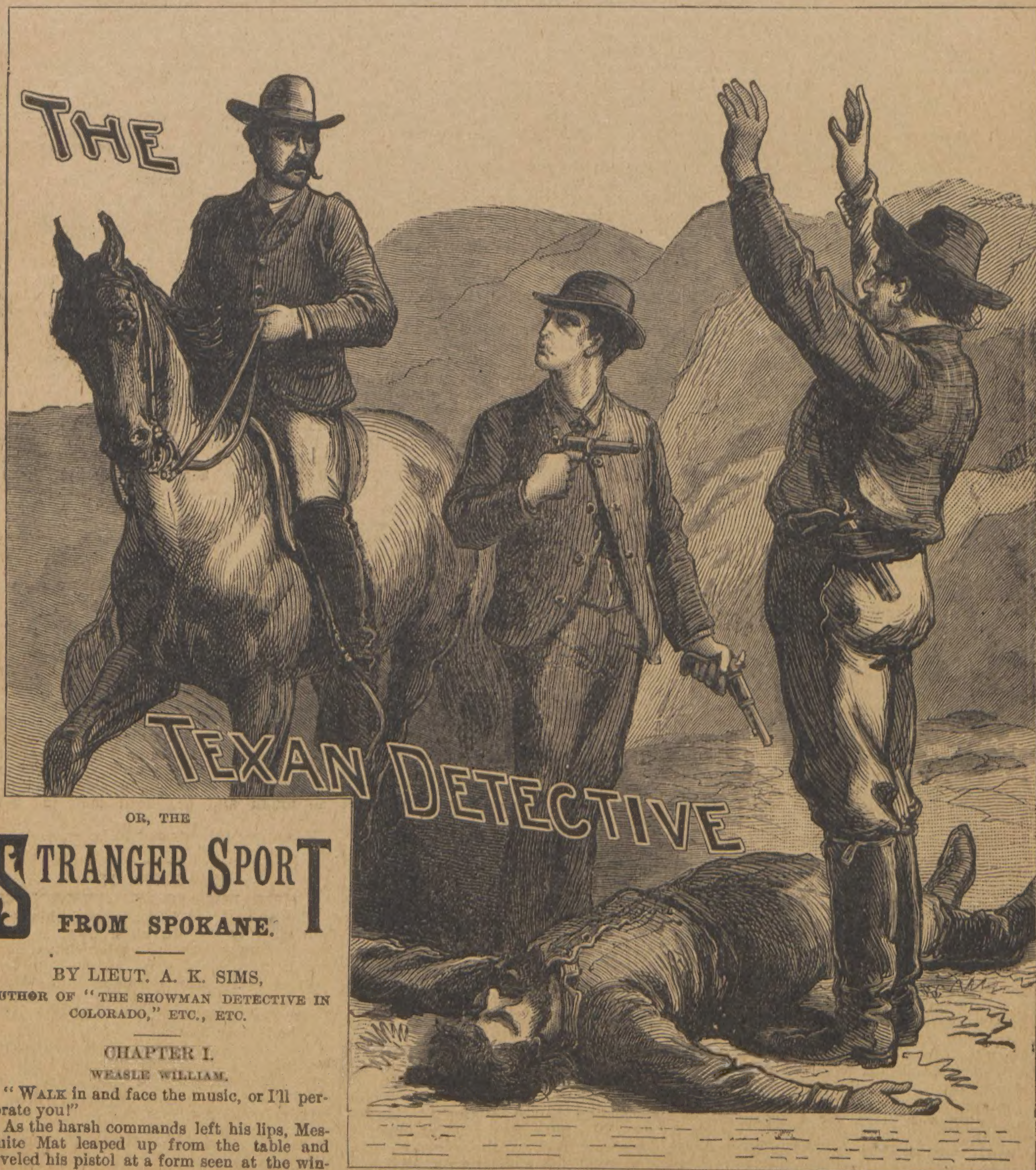
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OR, THE STRANGER SPORT FROM SPOKANE.

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AUTHOR OF "THE SHOWMAN DETECTIVE IN
COLORADO," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

WEASLE WILLIAM.

"WALK in and face the music, or I'll perforate you!"

As the harsh commands left his lips, Mesquite Mat leaped up from the table and leveled his pistol at a form seen at the window.

There were three or four men in the room

TURNING TO THE SPORT, MESQUITE MAT SAID: "THIS IS MY LITTLE PICNIC, STRANGER, AND I'D THANK YOU NOT TO CHIP IN."

in the building known as the court house. They had had their heads together about the table, bending over some books, some money, and a heap of coyote scalps, when the breaking of a twig had drawn their attention to the fact that they were being spied on.

Mesquite Mat, noted for his nimbleness with the revolver, held the form cowering by the window until one of his associates could rush out.

"It's Weasel William!" and Silver Sol, dragging a little man into view, drew him along the corridor into the room, where he jammed him heavily into a chair.

"Whatever are you up to?" the little man growled, striving to look straight at his accusers with his ferret eyes. "Ain't a free and independent citizen of Maverick City a right to come to the court house which his taxes help to support?"

"Stow that!" Mesquite growled. "If you think you kin throw dust in our eyes you're a way off. You were watchin' us and hearin' what we were sayin'."

A sickly grin of admitted guilt spread over the Weasel's face.

"What of it, if ye know so much?"

Mesquite Mat's smoothly-shaven face was never a handsome one to look at. Now his eyes blazed as he reached over and took William by the collar and churned him up and down in the chair.

"What of it? You ought to know, Will Babbett, that I've killed men for less than that."

"You'll not kill me, because you'll want my vote, and because I can be of use to you. Divvy a little of the swag with me and I'll stick to ye through thick and thin!"

Mat jammed him down again and stood off, looking at him.

"What did you see? What did you hear?"

"Them same wolf scalps has passed over that table jist one hundred and three times, at five dollars a pass for each one of 'em! Maverick County is fuller of wolf scalps than she ever was of fleas!"

Weasel Will Babbett was only repeating what he had heard. Mesquite Mat and the others first seen in the room were the county commissioners and the clerk of — County, Texas, of which Maverick City was the county seat.

In their official capacity they had offered a bounty of five dollars apiece for coyote scalps, and a few dozen scalps had been bought and rebought by them until ten thousand dollars of the county's money had already gone into their own pockets!

Their plan of operation was simple. Instead of destroying the scalps as they were purchased, they were tossed through the window into the back yard, and when night came they were collected and represented the ensuing day.

"Ain't you afraid to say that to me, when you know the position I occupy?"

"Carlin crows never flies so high but what their tails follows 'em. You're away up now, that's a fact, but a little bit of a shot might bu'st a wing bone and bring ye down. Better have me fer a friend than a foe! I've knowed they was somethin' crooked fer some time with you fellers, and I've been layin' fer the information."

The county officials were white and uneasy.

"What do you want to make you keep your mouth shut?"

"A little pie in it, pardners. Let me sheer even with you, and I'm satisfied. You'll find that I'm not wantin' to be a hawg."

"What do you say, boys?"

There was silence for a minute.

"Accordin' to the way you was countin' awhile ago, my sheer would be jist a thousand dollars to date. Slap it down on the table there, and I'll tell you somethin' to show that I kin be of use to you."

"Spit it out!"

"Count out the money first! You've got it in the drawer there, fer I seen you shove it in!"

Mesquite Mat hesitated for but an instant, then drew out a wad of bills, from which he counted a thousand dollars, and placed the amount on the table.

"Go ahead and earn it before you take it. What's your story?"

He placed a cocked revolver on the table by the side of the pile of money, and laid his right hand on the revolver.

The Weasel simply laughed.

"I've hung around 'gamblin' establishments too long to be bluffed that way. If you should try to pull that, I'd dive under the table and have you by the legs and knife you in the stummick before you could wink!"

"String your story!"

"It's jist this," crossing his legs easily and leaning back in his chair. "That sport as struck town the other day called on Judge Gilbert Gale last night."

"Ah!"

"That interests you, does it? I thought it would. He calls hisself Caleb Strong, the Sport from Spokane; but it don't make no difference where he hails from; he's hyar fer you fellers, and he's hyar because Judge Gale brung him hyar."

If there was a man in Maverick City these men feared and hated, it was Judge Gilbert Gale. Should their frauds be unearthed, and they be defeated at the polls and punished, they could credit their downfall to Judge Gale.

"How do you know this?"

The Weasel screwed his face into a puckery smile.

"I hain't a weasel fer nothin', I hain't. I crep' onto the porch and up to a winder there, about like I did hyar, and heard their talk. I know it because they said so."

"What else do you know?"

"I think I've earned that thousand dollars, and I'll earn five thousand more fer you fellers in the same way, if you'll let me. You'll find that Weasel William's a good deal better fer a friend than fer a foe!"

He stretched out a hand for the money, but Mesquite Mat pushed the hand away with the muzzle of the revolver.

"Were any of our names mentioned? Was my name mentioned?"

"It 'pears to me I heard a cognomen somethin' like Mesquite Mat; and the feller that was handlin' it said that Mesquite Mat was a first-class rogue and a promisin' candidate fer the gallus!—not fer the Legislater', mind ye, but fer the gallus!"

"And what do they suspect us of?"

"Well, gentlemen, to sling it straight, they think you and a lot of others hyar, whose names I'll be glad to give you, air banded together to do up this county and every feller in it. They're onto this coyote game, and they say that you're the rough riders called the Lone Stars—that you've been doin' a little road-agent business, and the Lord only knows what else. They didn't 'pear to have a very good opinion of you, and that's a fact!"

"And what was their proof?"

"They didn't have a whole lot. That's what this Sport from Spokane is hyar fer. He's to round-up the proof fer the judge."

Mesquite shoved the bills across the table.

"I guess you're worth the money. We've got to kill you or admit you into the gang. If you want to go in reg'lar, and help us right along, come to the old school-house to-night, where we'll swear you in. But think over it well! If you join, there's no backin' out. I'm not afraid you'll tell about this business, now, for you'll want more money, and—"

There was a threat back of the words, which the Weasel well understood—a threat that if the little man did not join them that night, and prove true, he would be among the missing, of which the list, in that part of Texas, was frightfully large.

CHAPTER II.

THE SPORT FROM SPOKANE.

The Sport from Spokane—the man whose coming had so disturbed the serenity of Mesquite Mat and his brother thieves—drew rein in the shadow of a bowlder in the hills not a great distance from Maverick City.

There was nothing remarkable about

his dress or appearance. A graceful mustache shaded his mouth, and his lower limbs were encased in big cavalry boots. He was well proportioned and muscular.

The sharp crack of a revolver had caused him to draw in his horse, but as no further sounds came, he spurred on, to come upon, as he turned the bowlder, a man lying on the ground as if dead, with two others standing over the body. One of them, who was a typical Western tough, held his hands aloft, while the other threatened him with a brace of revolvers.

The man with the revolvers was Mesquite Mat!

The Sport from Spokane clapped spurs to his horse and rode quickly up to this singular group.

Mesquite Mat turned on the sport with a dog-like snarl, saying:

"This is my little picnic, stranger, and I'd thank you not to chip in. I caught this scoundrel here robbing a dead man. I made him hold up his hands, as I intend to march him to the Maverick City jail."

The Sport from Spokane looked down into the face on the ground and he gave a violent start. Although there had been an evident attempt at disguise in the hair, beard and clothing, the face was that of Judge Gilbert Gale!

The sport, who had given his name as Caleb Strong, had come to Maverick City to assist Judge Gale in defeating the schemes of certain criminals and punishing them for their numerous crimes.

Now the man he was to assist lay here on the ground, dead.

"I think I'm interested in this, just a little bit! Judge Gale was my friend!"

He was about to swing out of the saddle, when a clatter of hoofs drew his attention.

All three looked up and saw a band of ten or twelve men riding furiously toward them, wearing curious black masks. Set in the forehead of each mask was a glittering white star.

"Lone Stars!" and, as he spoke, the Sport from Spokane drew his revolver.

The Lone Stars were noted as road-agents and rough riders, and a reckless, dare-devil lot, who placed small value on human life.

The sport drew away his horse, backing it along the knoll, and observed that Mesquite Mat kept close by him, while the tough, whose hands had been pointed skyward, was left standing by the dead.

"Will it be a fight?"

Mesquite Mat did not answer, but keenly watched the horsemen and held his revolvers ready for instant use.

Then the pistols of the Lone Stars began to crack; the bullets kicking up little puffs of dust along the face of the knoll.

They came like a whirlwind, shooting at the men on the knoll, while the Sport from Spokane turned his horse about and galloped away, followed more slowly by Mesquite Mat, on foot.

Anxious to see the outcome of this singular charge of the Lone Stars, the sport rode to the top of the knoll, from whence he beheld them galloping away, bearing the tough and the dead man in their midst.

Mesquite Mat was not to be seen.

CHAPTER III.

AN INTERVIEW AND AN EAVESDROPPER.

The Sport from Spokane made his way bewilderedly to Maverick City, to find there another cause for astonishment. A young woman, a total stranger in the town, was in editorial charge of the Maverick "Brand," the newspaper which Judge Gale had started to fight his political and other battles.

The man from Spokane lost no time in visiting the office of the "Brand."

He found the editress, Miss Diana Temple, a comely young woman, dressed rather fetchingly, and possessed of much cool assurance. However, she became somewhat excited when told what had befallen Judge Gale.

"A searching party must be sent out! His body must be brought back and his

murderer punished! I'm half of the opinion, Mr. Strong, that Mesquite Mat is at the bottom of this business, in spite of what you say. Did he come back to town?"

The passing of Mesquite Mat along the street at that instant gave reply to the question. They could see his excited gestures and catch his words. They could hear him telling how he had come on the rascal robbing the pockets of the dead man, and how the Lone Stars had carried both the robber and the dead man away. They heard him declare, too, that the dead man was Judge Gale.

Diana Temple, excusing herself, hurried from the office, and the Sport from Spokane took his departure likewise and went toward the Gale residence.

He felt it his duty to acquaint Gladys Gale with what had befallen her father.

He was spared the trouble, for, entering the house, he saw that she knew what had occurred. She had just recovered from a paroxysm of weeping.

Gladys Gale was a handsome woman of twenty, whom Caleb Strong had never seen until his coming to Maverick City. There was, however, a tie binding them, for Gladys knew the nature and occasion of his coming to the place.

She gave way to a fresh outburst of weeping as she accompanied him into the sitting-room.

"You were there? You saw my father?"

He was forced to answer by telling her that there was no doubt her father was dead. He had observed a wound on Gale's head from which the blood was then oozing—a wound he believed to have been made by the pistol shot he had heard. He believed, too, that the tough was the murderer.

But he did not know the name of this tough, and he had heard Mesquite say on the street that the fellow was a stranger. This last, however, the sport doubted.

As he talked to Gladys, he made no effort to conceal the fact that he was a sport detective—that he was representing himself to the public as a cattle buyer looking over the Texas ranges for the purpose of locating some ranches, merely as a blind to further the work which had brought him there.

The conversation was interrupted by a violent sneeze, coming from the corridor adjoining.

Instantly the detective leaped into the corridor and there corralled a little man, who shrank before him cowering.

"Who are you?" the sport demanded.

"If you please, I was jist makin' my way back to the kitchen to see the housekeeper fer to git my fortune told! I've heard she's a good 'n' at the biz!"

The falsehood was revealed in his face.

"You're a liar!" the man from Spokane declared, seizing him by the throat and crowding him against the wall. "You slipped in here to eavesdrop. You must have followed me from the office of the 'Brand.'"

"Nary, pardner!" gurgling the words as he twisted and writhed in an endeavor to free himself. "May I be shot if I done anything of the kind. I've strung it to you straight."

"Do you know him?"

Gladys had appeared.

"He's a slippery rascal known as Weasel William, who, I am told, can't be trusted or believed."

"You hear that, Weasel. Now, what did you come here for? Who sent you, that's what I want to know?"

The choking fingers were withdrawn, and the Weasel stood in the corner like a whipped schoolboy.

But William was not to be driven into any acknowledgment of the fact that he was constantly hounding the footsteps of the Sport from Spokane, and had doubled his diligence since joining the band of Mesquite Mat.

At the end of the unsuccessful interview the sport drew the Weasel to the outer door, pulling him along by the collar.

"You are lying to me, and I know it. You came here because you thought you might hear something that might be to

the advantage of your master, Mesquite Mat. Now, I want to give you warning. If I catch you hounding me again I'll treat you a good deal worse than I do now."

He gave him a forward push and deliberately kicked him down the steps.

A howl came from the little man as he felt the hard toe of the sport's boot, and the howl deepened into a screech as he landed at the foot of the steps in a cactus bed.

"I'll pay you for that! See if I don't. Some of the littlest snakes are the pizenest!"

He made a grab at the torturing spines that filled his knees; then shook his fist with venomous hate and disappeared around a corner of the building.

CHAPTER IV.

A COWBOY'S FROLIC.

In the gaming room of the saloon and gambling house known as The Maverick Corral, sat the Sport from Spokane, a night or two later, keenly watching the crowds that came and went.

He had himself led a searching party, and other searching parties had gone out, but no trace of Judge Gale had been found.

Gladys Gale was heartbroken, and every one, except the editress of the pugnacious Maverick "Brand," felt that the fortunes of the political party which Gale had led had gone glimmering.

The "Brand" was as red hot and as venomously clever as ever. It seemed to fear neither man nor devil; and in that town, where Mesquite Mat's influence appeared to have become supreme, it boldly charged him and his friends with knowing more about the murder of the judge than they were willing to admit.

The Maverick Corral was owned and controlled by Mesquite Mat, and was as palatial a dive as is ever seen in the wilder portions of the West.

The sport smiled across the table at Mesquite Mat, who now took a seat and tossed out an unused pack of cards, coolly remarking:

"A game in honor of our acquaintance! You call yourself the Sport from Spokane. I might say I'm the Sport of Maverick City. We ought to be friends, don't you think? There's no use of two of a trade quarreling!"

The sport knew how much of real friendship lay back of the words. Deadly hate was illy concealed in Mesquite's sullen face. Besides, the sport was sure the Weasel had acquainted Mat with all he knew.

However, it was not wise to admit this, so he drew his chair closer to the table, and the game began.

It lasted until far past midnight, with varying luck. Mesquite became so absorbed that he forgot time and place and everything—almost forgot who his opponent was, while the crowds came and went, the dealers called, the billiard balls clicked, and the glasses rattled on the bar.

Suddenly these noises ceased and the room became full of confusion and uproar. Through the broad, double doorway, into the crowd a half dozen cowboys rode their bronchos, flourishing their revolvers and yelling like unloosed imps.

The Circle Bar Ranch had paid off its men the previous day, and they were celebrating the event by "taking the town."

Mesquite Mat left his chair, with an exclamation.

"The fools! A few of them need to be made into corpses to teach the others some sense."

The cowboys' revolvers were beginning to crack; glass began to shiver and fly from the chandelier which hung above the tables, while the habitués of the place sought safety through the windows.

A lamp dropped to the floor, where it broke, deluging everything with kerosene.

This aroused Mesquite to fury.

"Take that!" he howled, plucking out a pistol and firing at the foremost cowboy.

The ball failed of its mark, and before Mat could fire again, another lamp

dropped, striking his arm and knocking the pistol from his hand.

This lamp ignited the kerosene on the floor, and the flame sprang instantly to the ceiling.

The tumult became a pandemonium, and Mesquite seemed to lose what little discretion he had left.

With a leap forward like that of a mountain lion he dragged the cowboy leader from the saddle. Then he fastened his fingers in the rider's throat and began to choke him into insensibility.

All the while his words rang out like the vicious cuts of a whip.

"You devil, I'll kill you for that! I'll choke the life out of ye!"

The leaping flames, however, had startled all by the impending danger, and a general rush was being made to stay the fire.

The cowboys, sobered by the event, crowded their horses into the streets; and in a little while the flames were brought under control.

But nearly all the lamps were out, and Mesquite Mat had vanished from the view of the Sport from Spokane.

The sport was thinking of making his way from the room, and wondering if he should ever come again into possession of the money he had placed on the gaming table, and which Mat, on the entrance of the cowboys, had scooped up and crammed into a pocket, when he felt a touch on the sleeve.

"Just a word," was whispered into his ear by a voice that sounded somewhat familiar. "Don't give up the fight you're in just because Judge Gale is not here to help you! Go on and fight the harder. You'll win, for you've got friends here who will back you."

The sport reached out to detain the speaker, but clutched only empty space. The speaker had slipped on with the crowd.

Out in the open air, the sport tried to identify that voice; it was familiar—he had heard it before—yet, who was it?

"Yes, I'll go on in the fight, just as if Judge Gale was alive! I owe it to his memory and I owe it to his daughter. I should be a recreant if I did otherwise."

The cowboys were plying their revolvers in the streets, and some of the angered citizens were returning the fire; and, as the sport turned the corner, he saw one of the cowboys, severely wounded, carried by on a stretcher.

"The two biggest fools in the world are a cowboy at the end of a round-up and a sailor at the end of a voyage."

With which opinion the Sport from Spokane betook himself from the dangerous vicinity.

CHAPTER V.

WHISPERED ENCOURAGEMENT.

The cowboys painted the town red that night, and, when they were gone, it was known that the Maverick City Bank had been broken into and twenty thousand dollars had disappeared from the safe.

This announcement threw the town into a new fever of excitement, for many of the business men kept their deposits in the bank, and its failure meant their ruin.

Was the robbery the work of the cowboys? That was the question naturally on every lip, and there were many ready to believe that the cowboy raid was but a blind intended to cover up this darker work.

However, no arrests were made, for there were few who cared to bring so serious a charge without ample proof to back it, as the cowboys were likely to strike hard in return.

The Sport from Spokane, whose experience in such matters had been ample, was of the opinion that the bank breakers were residents of Maverick City, who had taken advantage of the excitement of the night. And he was of the further opinion that Mesquite Mat had definite knowledge of the affair, if he was not the leader of it.

An examination of the building and the marks left by the burglars, had assured his trained eye that the robbery had occurred but a short time before daylight;

so that Mesquite Mat would have had abundant time for cracking the strong safe.

But the sport did not intend to be led astray from the special object he had in hand—to follow up such clues as would lead to the downfall of the rascals he was particularly shadowing.

Passing along the street near the bank building, with this thought in his mind, the Spokane Special observed something he had not observed before, which was Mesquite Mat walking with the young editress, Diana Temple!

It was plain to any observer that Mesquite was much taken by the dashing air of the young woman, and was falling heels over head in love with her; but what puzzled the sport was that she should be seen publicly in Mesquite's company. Mat had an unsavory reputation, and had been notoriously the enemy of Judge Gale, the founder of the Maverick "Brand"; so how could the woman at all favor or show friendship for the man?

As the sport stared at them, a man descended hurriedly from a building near and addressed him:

"If your name is Caleb Strong, you're wanted, sir, quick! Miss Gladys Gale has called for you. She fell on the street here, a while ago, and is hurt, and is now in a room at the end of the upper corridor."

Words that alarmed the sport, but whose statement he did not question.

"Gladys Gale asking for me?"

"Yes, sir," with a half-military salute.

He was a shabby, ill-favored fellow, whom the sport did not remember to have seen before.

"I helped to carry her up there, and when we'd made her comfortable, she asked if I knowed you, and would I go tell you she wanted to see you."

With a muttered "thank you!" Strong leaped into the stairway, and bounded up it, two steps at a time, and when he gained the upper landing, he ran quickly along the dark corridor. The place was like a dungeon, for its gloom.

He was recalled, too late, to the fact that his deep interest in Gladys Gale had led him to cast aside his usual caution.

The flooring seemed suddenly to fall away from beneath his feet, and he was precipitated headlong into a dark void.

He threw out his hands with a wild cry, and his fingers coming in contact with a piece of timber, he frenziedly clung to it.

Then a revolver cracked from the gloom below, the ball plowing into the timber at the side of his head; and, releasing his hold, the sport dropped downward with awful swiftness.

He brought up with a crushing jolt and the feeling that every bone in his body was broken. He had fallen into a heap of boards and scantlings piled in confusion, which were splintered and slivered and filled with old nails.

Workmen had been repairing the house, and the material removed had been tossed down into this lower room, where it lay as a deadly trap for him.

He staggered unsteadily to his feet, scrambled out of the heap of refuse and darted toward the front of the building. He expected the revolver to crack again and a ball to eat a hole in his back.

As he did so, the lower doors were thrown open, letting in the sunlight and a number of men from the street.

In the forefront of the crowd was Mesquite Mat.

At sight of him a great rage filled the heart of the sport, for words were not needed to tell him that Mesquite Mat had set in motion the plot meant to result fatally.

Mesquite Mat had heard the shot. He had been in waiting; and fancying the sport dead or dying, he had rushed in. Now, he stood dazed and bewildered.

"What's the meaning of this?" he at last ejaculated.

"Just this!" and the sport pushed near and glared into Mat's face. "Some scoundrel tried to kill me. But I'm alive yet, and worth a dozen dead men!"

Mesquite Mat recoiled.

"Shall we not go back and finish that little game?" the sport continued, with difficulty crowding down and mastering his ill feelings. "That was a pretty little game, and it was broken into most untimely. I noticed that you chucked my money into your pocket. Sha'n't we go back and settle who it shall belong to?"

"No! curse you!" Mat hissed under his breath. "I'm not hunting a game of cards jist now. We heard a shot in here and we want to know what was meant by it!"

"Well, I fell through a hole in the corridor and smashed into a lot of lumber over there; and while I was coming down a fellow shot at me. I don't know who he was, though perhaps it was Weasel William. Likely he's to be found back there!"

But the firer of the shot was not to be found. He had made his way into the street through a window and had disappeared.

CHAPTER VI.

IN THE HANDS OF HIS FOES.

As arranged, the Sport from Spokane called on Gladys Gale that evening, though his aching bruises made him feel that he ought to be in bed. His hurts were so many that he fairly limped as he walked to the house.

In anticipation of his coming, a dainty supper had been prepared, to which he and Gladys sat down alone.

They were waited on by the servant already mentioned as having a reputation for fortune-telling.

Whatever her occult powers, Nancy Stackpole was a quiet and unobtrusive person, who came and went with the soft tread of a cat. She was of about middle age, and had once been attractive in appearance.

Gladys Gale, however, did not seem to desire her presence in the room, preferring to serve the table herself, and Caleb was quite willing to have it so, for he never tired of looking into the handsome face of his fair hostess.

He could not fail to observe, though, that her manner was distraught. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes shone with unusual brilliance. Evidently she was repressing some strong emotion.

The sport fancied this due, in great measure, to her bereavement. Judge Gale had not been dead over three days, and the shock had well nigh prostrated her.

There was much to talk about. The guest recounted the incident of the afternoon, and was pleased to note that the news brought a look of anxiety to her lovely face.

"You really ought to leave this place," she averred. "If you remain here I am afraid father's fate will be yours. These enemies are desperate. Fighting them brought him to his death."

"I have friends who will see that I am not harmed. Of course there is danger, but I shall be watchful. Would you believe it? One of those friends is Diana Temple?"

He watched her askance, and continued: "She called to see me this afternoon. Ostensibly she came up to get an account of the fall I had in the building for the columns of the Maverick 'Brand,' but she took occasion to say before she went away that she was my friend, and would stand by me through thick and thin. She is a rather remarkable young woman, don't you think?"

Gladys did not reveal any trace of jealousy, which he had hoped the statement would evoke. She received the news with an impassiveness that seemed strange.

"What do you think of her?" he persisted.

"She called to see me, too," was the unexpected reply. "As you say, she is a strange woman, and she said some things which tended to excite me. I can't tell you now what they were, but you are sure to know by and by. She is nobly fighting father's battles."

As they talked they sipped their coffee, and, at length, a drowsy feeling began to take possession of the sport.

He had lost much sleep recently, and attributed it to that.

He called for more of the coffee, thinking it would clear his brain and drive away the sleepy feeling; but the drowsiness increased so much that he soon found it difficult to follow the conversation.

"I declare I was almost napping," he asserted, pulling himself up with a jerk.

Her face was but dimly revealed across the table. He could not be quite sure that she answered him or heard him, for the drowsiness wonderfully grew on him.

"I am so sleepy that I must go home, or I'll go to sleep in my chair."

Then he tried to get on his feet, pulling at the table for assistance, but he seemed glued to the chair. His head grew weighty as lead, and soon fell forward on his breast.

"I—I—"

The words failed; unconsciousness had overpowered him.

When he awoke he had a feeling that he had slept many hours. His mind was still lethargic and dull, and his limbs felt heavy. He did not have the power of body or will to make a movement.

So he lay quite still, wondering dimly where he was and what had befallen him.

Bit by bit the occurrences of the past few days came back, and his memory led him on until it brought him to that supper with Gladys Gale.

Like a shock he was aroused.

"The coffee was drugged!"

This was his quick conclusion, although his mind shrank from the possibilities the conclusion held; and if the coffee was infected, Gladys Gale must have drugged it. That would explain her evident excitement and her refusal to let the servant serve the table. The beverage had been drugged in the cup, and not in the vessel where made; and thus Gladys had been able to drug him without affecting herself.

All these were convictions which he could not resist.

Up to this moment he had made no movement. His mind had grown active, although his body had remained dormant; but the increasing activity of his mind drove the lethargy from his limbs.

He moved, and heard a voice cry out.

With extreme difficulty he turned half over and looked around.

He found himself in a wild canyon in the full blaze of day, grouped about by a number of men!

Stranger than all, these men wore those never-to-be-forgotten masks, holding the white star!

One of the Lone Stars arose and came toward him. He counted them over, and made their number eight.

He now sat up, staring at the man whom he believed to be Mesquite Mat. The clothing was entirely different, and the mask hid the face, but the walk was Mesquite's, and, when the person spoke, the voice, though disguised, was that of Mesquite Mat.

"Come around, have you? I must say you are one of the seven sleepers. You slept all the way here, and we was just wonderin' if you was ever goin' to wake up when you come around."

"You gentlemen of the Lone Star brought me here? I don't need to ask that, for of course you did; but, I'd like for you to tell me what made me sleep so?"

He did not expect a satisfactory reply, and the answer staggered him.

"I reckon there was a little bit of opium mixed with the sugar in your coffee. You think Gladys Gale your friend! Let me tell you, you're away off. She done you up, last night, and here you are!"

The sport straightened up with sudden energy.

"You lie, Mesquite Mat! I know you, in spite of that thing on your face. And I tell you, you lie!"

The spokesman drew back a step in evident rage.

"Have a care!" he hissed. "If things were even, you wouldn't dare to say that, for I'd shoot you as soon as the words left your lips. If you drive me, I'll do it anyway!"

A fierce anger that was almost inexplicable filled the heart of the sport. He had no fear of these men. Perhaps the drug had temporarily made him indifferent to consequences.

"You lie! You lie, Mesquite Mat!" he repeated, almost venomously.

The Lone Star dropped a hand to his hip, but removed it without drawing a weapon.

"I'm not going to let you hurry me into killing you. I'll kill you soon enough. But I want you to know, first, how big a fool you have made of yourself. When her name didn't draw you to your death, she thought she'd try opium!"

"And do you know what it was done for? She was glad to have her own father put out of the way that she might come into his fortune; and of course she's not going to let you fight the old man's battles and maybe beat her out of what she risked so much to get! She ain't that kind!"

Others of the band had approached and stood looking down at the sport.

The great rage that filled him caused him to rise to his feet and face them.

"Gittin' ready fer a stampede, eh?"

One of them tossed a lariat about his neck and drew tight the noose.

"Jist remember that it ain't agoin' to be easy to git away from us, and think several times before you try it!"

But Mesquite lifted the lariat from the sport's neck and tossed it aside.

"I'm foreman of this round-up! He can't git away. If he tries it I'll fill him full of holes. Now, look you here!"

"I know who you are and all about you. You have come here to ferret down certain chaps I could name. Let me tell you that you never undertook such a dangerous thing in your life. The only thing that can come of it is your own death."

"And your death will come right now, in less than ten minutes, if you don't agree to leave the country and drop the business that brought you here!"

He looked earnestly at the sport through the holes in his mask.

That fearless rage still filled the heart of the Sport from Spokane.

"What do you say? If you'll promise on your honor to leave Maverick City, we'll turn you loose! You see that precipice out there? It drops about two hundred feet. You'll go over that precipice, with a lot of bullets in you, if you don't promise. You can take your choice!"

Menacing growls from the Lone Stars emphasized the threat.

The alternative was so terrible that few men would have hesitated for an instant. The sport-detective would not have done so, probably, if his mind had not been unnaturally influenced by the drug. Temporarily, death had lost its terrors, and not even the shock of this ferocious declaration could quite rouse him.

"What do you say?"

"I say that you are a scoundrel, Mesquite Mat, and I defy you."

"You won't promise?"

"No!"

"Then die!"

CHAPTER VII.

OVER THE PRECIPICE.

At a signal from Mesquite Mat, three of the outlaws leaped forward and attempted to close with the sport. But all the fury of a strong man made desperate seemed roused in the sport-detective, and, with a hoarse exclamation, his right fist struck out, landing one of the Lone Stars on his back.

In a moment the other two had grasped him, but he might have succeeded in flinging them off but for the circle of cold steel that pressed his temple. Mesquite Mat held a revolver to his head.

Wild and furious though he was, he knew that further resistance would but hasten the end.

As he was thus held, his hands were securely bound and he was pushed toward the awful brink.

As he stood on its rim, and caught a view of the swimming depths, his head fairly reeled with dizzy fear and his full peril was for the first time realized.

He heard rifle locks click behind him;

and, glancing back, observed the members of the Lone Star band draw near, in a half circle, with rifles cocked and leveled.

The implacable voice of Mesquite Mat again demanded:

"Will you promise?"

"My men are ordered to shoot, and you may bet they'll shoot bullets! There's no monkey business in this thing. Say that you'll leave Maverick City and drop your infernal detective work, or off that precipice you go, with your back full of holes!"

In spite of his iron nerve the Sport from Spokane quailed. Success in his work was dear, but life was dearer.

Mesquite Mat took out his watch—a fine gold repeater that he had taken from a passenger on a robbed stage—and began to count off the seconds.

"You might as well say your prayers. You've got just a minute to live. Just a minute yet to make your choice. Five seconds of it are gone already. Six—seven—eight—nine—ten seconds. You've got to make up your mind thunderin' quick!"

The sport stepped forward to look into the chasm into which he was to pitch, vainly hoping that it might offer a chance of life.

He recoiled from that view of jagged rocks, which seemed to lift their points to welcome his descent.

"Thirty seconds!" shouted Mesquite Mat.

But the Sport from Spokane hardly heard him. Beneath the feet of the sport a boulder had turned, hurling him down.

Then, with an inarticulate cry he shot over the rim of the precipice into the awful void.

As he did so, the rifles of the outlaws crashed, but the bullets only whistled through the empty space where he had stood.

The sport felt that he was falling to his death, as he shot down, down, down! So fearful and swift was his descent that he almost lost consciousness.

Then he crashed into the yielding top of a pine, where he swayed between heaven and earth. His body was cut and bleeding, his clothing was torn, and the bonds were stripped from his wrists.

But he was not dead nor seriously injured. He clutched the bending bough with a feeling of horror and stared down into the depths that yet lay below. He had fallen a hundred feet, but more than that distance still stretched toward the bottom of the chasm.

The pine that had saved him was rooted on a ledge, from which it thrust its top out almost at right angles. Its roots were set in the crevices of the granite; and, though it bent, it did not break.

The sport glanced up toward the point from which he had dropped, but, though he could see the rim, he could not see the outlaws. He heard their voices in excited and questioning comment. Evidently they thought he had fallen to the rocks below.

As soon as he could regain sufficient strength of mind and body he crawled shivering along the trunk of the tree until he gained the ledge, where he lay panting and exhausted. His escape from death had been so miraculous he could hardly realize he was still preserved. His head throbbed painfully and every bone ached.

His hearing seemed to grow clearer, for he heard Mesquite Mat shout to some of the men to go into the chasm and look for the body.

It took them some time to make the descent, but when they had gained the chasm's trough, the sport could hear what they said very distinctly, and from their voices he knew that Mesquite Mat was along assisting in this search.

As they were now below him, he could distinguish all they said. They were puzzled at not finding the body. They could not believe he had escaped death, and finally reached the conclusion that he must have struck on some of the rocky points higher up, and that the body had become wedged and held in a crevice.

The sport feared to creep to the edge of

the ledge to peer down, and so lay harkening to these words and scarcely daring to move.

The puzzled and disappointed outlaws climbed back to the top of the precipice, where he heard them again talking, though he could not understand what they said.

After a time these sounds ceased, and, though he felt sure they had gone back to Maverick City, he still feared to stir from his position, not knowing but they were lying in wait to shoot him.

CHAPTER VIII.

A MYSTERY.

The Sport from Spokane still lay on the ledge, weak and faint, long after the departure of the Lone Star outlaws, uneasily wondering how he was to get down and what he was to do if he succeeded in getting down.

The strange thing that had befallen him at the residence of Judge Gale passed his comprehension. In spite of the evidence pointing to the fact he was not ready to believe that Gladys Gale had deliberately drugged his coffee.

He utterly refused to credit Mesquite Mat's statement that Gladys had procured the death of her father that she might come into his property. It seemed preposterous. There was nothing of the murderer in her composition.

He dragged himself to his feet and made an examination of the ledge. It was not of great length, and at first thought it effectually imprisoned him.

But after a time he observed that there were clefts in the face of the rock and outthrust points, by means of which, through a great expenditure of strength, he might descend in safety.

He did not attempt it, however, for a long time, preferring to wait until he grew stronger.

Then he climbed painfully and carefully to the bottom of the chasm.

Night was almost at hand when he made his way out of it and set his face in the direction of Maverick City. He was faint from hunger and exhaustion, as he had had nothing to eat for almost twenty-four hours, and his exertions had been of the most wearying character.

But his mind had regained its wonted clearness, and his old unconquerable will was again supreme. He had wondered and questioned whether he should abandon the work which seemed to so thicken about with peril. Now, he was fiercely resolved.

"I will face them and fight them, if I die for it! I will find out if Gladys Gale is or is not the honest woman she seems! I will probe this mystery to the bottom."

He approached the town with great care, and drew near the Gale residence.

His condition was far from presentable. He had bathed in a stream and washed the dust and blood from his face and hands, but his clothing was torn and the scratches and marks received in the fall showed plainly.

Having passed through the gate, he walked straight up to the door and rang the bell.

Night had fallen, but when the door opened, a flood of light revealed his identity to Nancy Stackpole, who had opened the door.

She stared at him as if in surprise, but held the door ajar for him to enter.

He pushed by her into the hall.

"Is Miss Gladys here?"

"She's not been here since last night."

"No? Where is she?"

"She's gone to Fort Worth or Dallas."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Very sure, Mr. Strong. I saw her go!"

"Did she leave no word for me?"

"None that I know of. None with me."

He hesitated, but would not turn away.

"See here. I can't credit the statement that she's left the town. She intimated nothing of the kind when I talked with her last night. Did she take a trunk?"

"No!"

"Is her clothing gone?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

"Know, then! Here's a dollar. Find out!"

She looked at him sharply; then shuffled away, holding the dollar tightly in her palm.

The sport was in a fever of excitement. He was sure Gladys Gale had not left Maverick City of her own accord. What did her absence mean, connecting it with the drugged coffee he had swallowed? He could not doubt the coffee had been drugged. He waited impatiently for Nancy Stackpole's return.

"I don't know whether she took any clothing or not. I can't find any missing."

"Then she was carried away."

The woman stared in open-mouthed astonishment.

He closed the hall door with his foot and questioned Nancy Stackpole minutely concerning her young mistress, but could learn nothing except that Gladys Gale had left the house during the night unattended after saying she was going to Dallas or Fort Worth.

It was all so unsatisfactory that he believed Nancy Stackpole was lying.

He was resolved to find out if Gladys had left on a Texas & Pacific train, and hurried from the house toward the railway station.

Hardly was he out of sight, when there was a movement in a room that connected with the corridor, and Weasel William glided out and planted himself before Nancy Stackpole, much to that woman's astonishment.

"Did you promise to find out about Miss Gladys Gale for that man?" He smiled craftily, and held up a crisp ten-dollar bill.

"Oh, you needn't deny it, for I heard you! I heard everything he said! Ha, ha! You didn't know I was hiding in that room. He paid you for findin' out; and I'll pay you a good deal more fer not findin' out."

He rustled the bill beneath her nose.

"La, sakes! You nearly skeered me to death!" she cackled, clutching the money and greedily examining it. "That's a mighty pretty bill. If you'll only hand over enough of 'em, I'll never know anything."

"Well, now, I want to deal fairly by ye, Miss Stackpole, if that's ye'r name. Gladys Gale went to Dallas, as she said she was a-goin'; an' she went jest because she was afraid o' him. She was in sich a big hurry, was the reason she didn't take her clo'es! Likely she'll write to ye and have ye send 'em to her."

"I'm a friend to Miss Gladys an' to her dad when he was livin'! I onc't worked fer the old man."

"You don't look like a man 'at 'd work hard at anything."

"Jist hard enough to draw my pay, you understand. I worked fer the old man, an' he and I got to be real friendly. I ain't a millyunair, but I know a tree where a good many of them ten-dollar bills grow, and I'll shake it fer ye, now and then, if you'll do jist what I say. Don't you tell that man anything about Gladys Gale. His only interest in knowin' is to do her an injury."

Nancy Stackpole did not act very much as if she believed the words of the Weasel, but she pocketed the money, and with ready alacrity promised obedience.

"If you'll shake that greenback tree often enough I'll be deaf and dumb and blind to nigh about everything. You hear me!"

CHAPTER IX.

SILVER SOL CORRALLED.

The Sport from Spokane left the Gale residence with the full determination of going immediately to the station and learning if Gladys Gale had departed on a train for points east along the line of the Texas & Pacific railway.

However, as he walked along, he began to think it might be advisable to get better clothing, as his appearance would be sure to attract attention and questions.

So he hurried to his room; and, after he had dressed, his hunger so overcame

him that he went into the first restaurant and got a square meal.

The effect of the supper was beneficial. It inspired him with new heart and courage.

But when he went to the depot he could learn nothing, though he cautiously approached the station agent with great care and a bribe.

The agent declared somewhat curtly that he did not want the silver dollars that the sport dropped on the table; but it was evidently not in his heart to let them remain there for some one else to pick up on the sport's departure.

However, he knew nothing of the departure of Gladys Gale. He declared he had not seen her get on the train, but admitted that it was possible she might have got on without being seen by him. He was sure he had sold her no ticket.

The sport left the agent, satisfied the silver dollars were well spent. He did not believe that Gladys had left the town of her own accord, and had not believed it from the first.

As he walked back into the heart of the town, in a dark and narrow street he came suddenly face to face with Silver Sol, one of Mesquite Mat's right-hand men. Silver Sol had been of the band which witnessed the sport's fall over the precipice.

He gave a start of surprise and a scared exclamation, and drew back as if he had seen a ghost.

Before he had time to recover or get it through his thick head that this was a live man who stood before him, the Sport from Spokane had him covered with a revolver.

"Put your hands up and walk into that stable!"

Only for an instant did Silver Sol hesitate. Then he obediently stepped into the stable, which was empty, and whose door stood ajar just at hand.

The sport glided in after him, and closed the door, still keeping him covered with the threatening pistol.

It would have been so dark in the stable that Sol might have been able to draw a weapon, but for the bright moonlight that streamed in through a wide window.

"I'm the livest dead man you ever saw, Silver Sol, as you'll find if you provoke me. How I got out of that canyon don't matter now. I want to ask you some questions. Answer them, and then go tell Mesquite Mat and your pards that I am still on their trail."

Silver Sol moved uneasily, but still kept his hands above his head. He was really relieved to know that this was a flesh and blood man instead of a spirit.

"Tell me what you have done with Gladys Gale!"

"I don't know nothin' about her."

The sport stepped nearer and placed the cold muzzle of the weapon against the ruffian's head.

Silver Sol stood his ground, though he visibly winced.

"Tell me what you know about Gladys Gale! Where is she?"

Sol hesitated for a moment, drawing back from the cold tube.

"She ain't in town, sir; that's a fact. I'm told that she went to Dallas."

"Speak the truth, you scoundrel, or I'll blow your brains out."

Hardly were the words out of his lips when Silver Sol swung his hands downward and caught the revolver muzzle, pushing it aside just as the weapon exploded, and the ball whizzed by his head.

He tried to tear the weapon from the sport's hand, but did not succeed.

However, he delivered a kick that lamed the arm of the sport for a moment; and, leaping on him with the fury of a tiger, he strove to bear him back to the ground.

Then ensued a struggle as desperate as any ever recorded.

By clutching the sport's revolver hand, the villain was able to keep the sport from using the weapon; while, at the same time, he tried to draw and ply a knife.

Seeing the revolver was useless in this emergency, the sport dropped it to the floor; then wound his arms around the

body of his adversary and endeavored to hurl him from his feet.

To and fro they writhed, swaying up and down, and back and forth, the length of the stall in which they now found themselves.

It seemed certain the report of the pistol would draw others to the scene, and who and what these others might be would perhaps determine the end of the combat.

Realizing the great probability that some, if not all of them, would be friends of Silver Sol, the sport exerted himself to bring the struggle to a speedy close.

By a lucky twist, he pitched Silver Sol headlong, and, falling on him, held him down, while he sought to choke him into insensibility.

But Silver Sol was possessed of great strength, and was as agile as a cat. He turned over, in spite of all the sport could do, and then the sport felt the sting of a knife in his shoulder.

With a bitter imprecation he began to batter the ruffian's face, and prevented another prod of the knife.

Then he closed his fingers around Sol's windpipe and stopped his breath.

As he thus held the struggling wretch, he heard men running, and knew they were hunting for the place from whence the sound of the shot had come.

Some of them turned toward the stable.

Sol had been choked into wheezing insensibility, and the sport, grabbing up the revolver he had dropped, scudded from the place, feeling that his peril would be great if caught there by friends of the outlaw.

He had failed to learn anything of Gladys Gale, but he had apprised his foes of the fact that he was still in the land of the living, and able to do battle against them.

CHAPTER X.

THE MAN WITH THE BOMBS.

Two men, whose faces showed them to be scoundrels of the deepest dye, were squatting contentedly by a camp-fire, devouring a hastily prepared breakfast. The country was gullied and rocky, of an arid and forbidding appearance, though mesquite trees grew abundantly in patches; such a country as is typical of portions of Western Texas.

The men were members of the Lone Star band of road-agents and depredators, though they wore no masks.

Near by two ponies were grazing, and these ponies would have attracted more than a passing attention. They were saddled and bridled, and between them was slung a blanket stretcher.

More remarkable than all was the fact that a woman lay, seemingly asleep, on the ground near the camp-fire—a young woman, who was none other than Gladys Gale.

The stretcher between the horses had been used to convey her from Maverick City, which was not far distant, though hidden from view.

The time was the morning following the night that had witnessed the drugging of the Sport from Spokane.

Between their bites the Lone Stars talked of the occurrence in which they were so interested, and of the point to which they were hastening with the young woman, who slept on so unconsciously and helplessly; and their talk made clear the fact that she, too, had partaken of the drugged coffee, and had been dragged from the Gale residence.

"She is a tip-top snoozer and as purty as a picter."

The gloating declaration was followed by an exclamation of surprise.

Gladys Gale had moved and uttered a moan. One of the fellows got on his feet and hurried toward her.

"I do believe she's comin' around, jist when I was beginnin' to think she was goin' to sleep on like that till doomsday. She'd be easier to carry asleep, but I don't want her to die a-sleepin'."

However, she did not regain her senses. After a movement or two she lay quiet again, the influence of the potent drug being still strong upon her.

While the evil fellow leered down into the handsome face, the other startled him by a word of warning:

"Look out, pard, there's somebody a-comin'!"

From behind one of the bowlders a man had risen, who now came forward with smiles and bows.

He was a queer-looking man, with a long and cadaverous face. His eyes were bright and keen. His beard thin and straggling, though of considerable length. His clothing was black and shiny, as if from much use, with here and there a spot of grease showing brown; and he wore a battered silk hat.

A series of exclamations issued from his thin lips as he stepped forward; on his throat a protuberant Adam's apple worked up and down as he spoke; while from behind this Adam's apple there seemed to come the barks of a puppy dog.

As he drew near he took off his battered hat, extracted a handkerchief from it, and carefully mopped his face, glancing questioningly the while toward the sleeping beauty.

"In the circus business, I take it, gents? Or mebbe you're runnin' a band of barnstormers? I see you've got Barnum's wonderful sleeper, at any rate. I seen that very girl myself when I wasn't more'n knee high; and I declare to you there don't seem a line of her face changed nor a bit of the paint rubbed off in all that time; which seems to prove, gentlemen, that art goes way ahead of nature. Now, a genuine young woman of that age would be older than—than Cleopatra!"

His face beamed and wrinkled as he ended this speech, while the Adam's apple hopped up and down with wonderful agility and the puppy dog seemed fairly to yelp with delight.

The pair of Lone Stars did not know what to make of this singular being, at whom they stared with an astonishment that was not unmingled with awe and fear. They were hardly prepared to say whether they beheld a man or something galvanized into the semblance of a man that jumped and jerked and bowed like a jumping-jack worked by a string.

"Who is she?"

The bowing individual ceased his erratic motions and bobbed his head solemnly toward the sleeping woman.

"You don't really mean to tell me that she is just a pretense of a woman? You don't really mean it, now?"

"Who are you?" one of them gasped. "That's what I'd like to know. And I'd like to know what you're doin' hyar and where ye come from. I'm ready to swear that you don't belong up to Maverick City."

"Who am I? I'm Hy Hiram—Hydrophobia Hiram—at your service! You hear my little dog bark? I am always that way, since I was bitten. I can't help it. The antics of that little animal that seems to be hid in my throat—an' which is not there, gentlemen, really is not there—has lost me friends and home and everything. My great-aunt, from whom I expected a fortune, ordered me out of the house when that dog began to bark, and then died the next week, leaving all her money to found a hospital for sick cats. Only think of it! But you needn't be afraid of me. I'm perfectly harmless. The most innocent creature on earth, when I'm not molested."

The ruffians were really growing alarmed. They fancied the man before them was a lunatic of the most dangerous sort, and dropped their hands to pistols in their pockets.

"I hope you don't carry little toys like I do," the puppy dog chirruping louder than ever. "When shall we three meet again?"

He drew from one of his pockets—which seemed to bulge with similar round objects—a queer-looking, ball-shaped thing that seemed to be made of glass or some shiny substance. This he held up for their inspection.

"The weapon of the future, gentlemen! This is an age of progress. Gunpowder

isn't in it. In the future men will fight with dynamite. Should I take it into my head to pitch this bomb into the fire there, puff—where would we be? 'Ask of the winds that far around with fragments strewed the sea!' We'd be knocking our noses against the stars, that's what!"

"Put that up, won't you?" the ruffians appealed.

One of them brought his revolver into view.

"There never was such another weapon!" Hy Hiram chirruped. "For instance, now, if you should take it into your head to shoot me, you couldn't down me without downing yourself. This bomb would explode as I fell, and these in my pockets would explode; and the very hills would be so scared that they'd fall over each other!"

The Lone Stars drew back in dismay. They were sure, now, that the man was crazy; which was just the impression he wanted to create.

Suddenly the conviction came to one of them that Hy Hiram was not crazy, but only bluffing; and, like a flash, his revolver came out and he fired straight at Hy Hiram's breast, causing his companion to draw back with a half screech.

Hy Hiram seemed to flinch under the fire, but he did not fall, as the ruffian expected; and a second later he stepped forward, his face wreathed in smiles and the puppy dog barking as before, and spat something out on the ground.

"Gentlemen, if I hadn't caught that bullet in my mouth I fear to say what would have happened. We'd all have been dead men. As you seem to think these are not dynamite bombs, I'll just toss this one into the fire and show you!"

He immediately suited the action to the word, and, as the round missile dropped into the hot coals, a terrific explosion was produced, which scattered the fire in every direction and seemed to fairly shake the earth.

The Lone Stars, who had viewed with fear the spitting out of the bullet, and the failure of the revolver to drop the man in his tracks, now fled in wild confusion, seeking safety in the hills.

Hy Hiram laughed softly as he saw them running as if the very fiends were after them, and the big Adam's apple hopped gleefully up and down.

"That was a narrow escape for your uncle! I've had close calls, but never a closer, I guess. It was point blank! But I'm all right yet, and—"

He turned toward the young woman, who was stirring and trying to sit up, half recalled to her senses by the force and noise of the explosion.

He stooped above her and tenderly lifted her to an easier position.

The horses, that had started to run away, had stopped because of the interfering blanket stretcher, and he now went up to them and led them back to the vicinity of the fire, though of the fire very little now remained.

The dry grass was burning in two or three places, and, when he had extinguished it, he came back to Gladys Gale.

The Lone Stars did not return, and he had given them such a fright he did not think they would come back soon.

He was rejoiced to see the young woman had opened her eyes and was looking about, though she was evidently dazed and bewildered.

"You may count me a friend. Call me Hy Hiram for short. I know that you are from Maverick City over there; and if you're willin' I'll help you into that stretcher and take you back just as quick as I can. You'll be safer than here!"

She stared at him.

"How did I come here?"

"In that stretcher, I judge. You had two villains for an escort, but I've scared them away, and if you want to go back home, I'll take you back. Your name is?"

"Gladys Gale."

"Just so. I'm very glad to meet you. I saw by the newspaper that your father—but we'll not talk about that. Let me help you into the stretcher."

The queer clicking and chirruping in his

throat attracted her attention, and she stared at him again, at which he smiled and bowed and scraped with remarkable suavity.

"You'll find that you never struck a better friend. Too bad about your poor, dear father! But death comes to us all, miss, sooner or later! Sha'n't I help you into the stretcher?"

She stood up and uttered a cry, pointing out through the hills.

He wheeled and saw the two villains returning, reinforced by three others.

"Ah! I didn't scare 'em bad enough! They'll have to have more dynamite."

"They mean us harm, I'm afraid," she quavered.

Again he urged her to get into the stretcher, and she terrifiedly obeyed.

"I should rather ride one of the horses, though," she pleaded. "I can ride a man's saddle very well."

"Oh, you can?"

He deftly cut away the stretcher with his knife and helped her to mount. Then he clambered into the other saddle, and the horses were turned toward Maverick City.

Although this had been done with the utmost haste, the Lone Stars had drawn near enough to begin to use their rifles. Fortunately they were all afoot, else the race that ensued might have ended differently.

As it was, they ran with great speed along the broken ground, dropping now and then to a knee and firing.

Hy Hiram did not attempt to return the shots, but urged his horse into flight, and rode hard in the direction of Maverick City, the girl keeping at his side.

They were destined not to enter it, however, until after nightfall, for, before they had ridden out on the plain, they saw a band of horsemen coming down the trail from the town, and, rightly judging that they were Lone Stars and enemies, Hy Hiram and the girl turned back into the hills for safety and concealment.

The pursuing Lone Stars, who were afoot, had already been left far behind.

CHAPTER XI.

HY HIRAM IN MAVERICK CITY.

When the Sport from Spokane had freed himself from Silver Sol, he gravitated inevitably back to the residence of Judge Gale, in spite of his injuries.

He did not enter the house, thinking more might be learned by a quiet surveillance.

However, he had hardly stationed himself, when he was astonished beyond measure by seeing Gladys Gale ride up to the door, accompanied by a queer-looking stranger, who was also mounted.

His pleasure thrust all fear and uncertainty into the background. For an instant he forgot the strange manner in which his coffee had been drugged and his suspicion of Gladys Gale, and pushed forward to express his gratification at her return.

Judge Gale's man-of-all-work came forward to take the horses.

"Better put them in some livery stable and let the owners come for 'em," was Hy Hiram's advice. "They don't belong to us. I'd like to know the names of the chap that own 'em!"

All the while he was bowing and smiling and introducing himself as Hydrophobia Hiram, with a warning that his pockets must not be handled because of the dynamite bombs they held.

"They're the best thing to keep away burglars—not meaning that you'd burglarize me, of course, or pick my pockets! Just say 'dynamite' to a thief, and he'll walk two squares to keep from comin' nigh ye. Yes, thank ye, I don't care if I do!"

Gladys Gale had insisted that he should come into the house and have something to eat, and all three went up the steps together, the girl, Hy Hiram, and the Sport from Spokane.

Hy Hiram looked curiously at the sport when they were together in the well-lighted house.

"Shake," he said, in a low, earnest manner. "You and I are to be a good deal

more than friends, if I ain't mistaken! I guess you're the chap that Judge Gale writ me about!"

"And your name is—"

"James Lovelace, at your service."

Hy Hiram bent forward and whispered the name into the sport's ear, and the sport, when he heard it, retreated a step and stared him hard in the face.

"Yes, we're to be a good deal more than friends, I think," the sport admitted. "Shake!"

Gladys, who had departed to give some orders to the servant, joined them.

"I don't think I care for any coffee or anything to eat this morning," declared the sport, with a meaning and questioning glance.

"No?"

He fancied she flushed a little and averted her gaze.

Not satisfied, he asked a direct question:

"Can you tell me how that coffee came to be drugged that I drank here? I know you did not drug it!"

"I don't know! That which I drank was drugged, too. It, or the food! At any rate, I was overcome by it, and knew absolutely nothing from that time until Mr. Hiram found me lying on the ground out in the hills, where I had been conveyed by those two men."

The sport looked her keenly in the face as she made this assertion, and was forced to admit that she seemed to be speaking the truth. Either that, or she was an admirable actress.

"Do you suspect any one?" he queried.

"I don't know what to think."

"What of Nancy Stackpole?"

"Would she have any object in it?"

"She might be made to have an object by the payment of money."

They had lowered their voices, for Nancy Stackpole was moving about not many yards distant.

Hy Hiram, who had sat with head bent to one side in a listening attitude, now leaped up and darted to a large sofa-lounge, which he quickly turned over. The form of a man was revealed on the floor beneath it—the sneaking, creeping form of Weasel William.

Hy Hiram seized him by the shoulders and dragged him into the middle of the room.

The sport started to run to his assistance, but sank back on the chair with a gasp. He had forgotten the flesh-wound given by the knife of Silver Sol, and which he had hastily bandaged.

However, Hy Hiram was quite a match for the Weasel. He could have conquered the Weasel had the latter offered any resistance, which was not the case.

Hy Hiram took one of the shiny bombs out of his pocket and held it before Weasel William's eyes. This one looked very much like a glass egg, and was evidently intended to be exploded by throwing it.

"The white and yaller of this here hen-fruit is made out o' dynamite and giant powder! I've a good mind to squeeze it down your throat and then kick you in the stummick. If I'd make you swaller it and then let you go, you'd have to go about with a sign pinned to your back sayin' 'please handle with care!'"

The Weasel stared at the bomb as if stupefied with horror.

"But I'll not make you eat the thing if you'll say how you got under that lounge and who sent you?"

Gladys and the sport were both now at his side.

Weasel William looked at them appealingly, but saw no mercy in their faces.

"I heard you talkin' outside, an', knowin' you'd come into this room, I hopped through the winder and skipped under this lounge. As to who sent me—"

"String it straight, pardner," warningly.

"I was sent by Mesquite Mat. I folloed Mr. Strong, after gittin' on his track a block or two further down!"

The Weasel was badly frightened, and was evidently telling the truth.

Hy Hiram saw it, and that it was useless to waste further time on him; and, before Weasel William or any one could remonstrate, Hy Hiram had lifted him bodily and thrown him through the window.

CHAPTER XII.

HIRAM VISITS THE MAVERICK CORRAL.

"I'm comin' fer you, pardner!"

Hy Hiram beamed across the gaming-table, while the puppy dog yelped in rare glee and the Adam's apple hopped up and down in a way that was fairly startling.

On the other side of the table sat Mesquite Mat, fingering a handful of cards.

The two were in the Maverick Corral, as the big saloon and gambling hell controlled by Mesquite Mat was called, and they were engaged in a game.

That Hy Hiram was a player of no mean ability was already being proven. He handled the pasteboards with the skill of a veteran card-sharp.

"I'm a-comin' fer you, pardner," slapping down another card. "I'm wantin' that wad o' greenbacks you showed me a while ago, an' I'm a-goin' to git it!"

Mesquite Mat carefully put down a card and looked his opponent keenly in the face. He was evidently more interested in what Hy Hiram had been saying than in the result of the game.

"And when you come on them men that had the girl?"

"Well, sir, it was as good as a circus! Why, they were runnin' away with her I don't know, when there's so many women to be had without goin' to so much trouble! I've an idea, though, that they thought her folks was rich, and they'd git a ransom by holdin' her."

He slapped down another card with much vehemence.

"I danced up to 'em, an' I tol' 'em as how I was loaded with dynamite and was liable to explode at any minute if they laid a finger on me, and when one of 'em didn't believe it, an' shot at me, of course I had to prove what I said, an' so I pitched a bomb into the fire and made a scatteration."

"Pardner, I'm a-comin' fer ye!"

Hy Hiram knew well enough the position occupied by Mesquite Mat, and that the men he was talking about were members of Mat's band of Lone Stars; yet he garrulously rattled on as if he never dreamed of the relation existing between them and Mat, or doubted that Mat would be naturally the enemy of such scoundrels.

"I'm alwus the champion of good-lookin' women, pardner, and I must say that girl is as likely a heifer as there is on the Texas ranges."

"Oh, I'm a-comin' fer ye!"

He was playing an exceptionally strong hand, and the puppy dog was howling with delight, while Hy Hiram's wrinkled face seemed fairly to ooze with good-humored pleasure.

"But about the bomb? You don't carry such things around with you?"

"Always, pardner! It's the best weapon yet invented. If a man down's me he gits it, too! See?"

He drew one of the bombs out of his pocket and laid it on the table between them.

Mesquite Mat drew back in sudden fear.

"Why, they hain't no harm in the thing if you treat it right! You might let it lay there peaceable fer ten year, and it'd never harm anybody!"

This was seemingly not a glass bomb, but one fitted with a fuse. He turned it around until the fuse was toward Mat.

The latter stared at the thing as if fascinated. He had heard from his men how Hy Hiram had rescued the girl, and the thing now lying on the table did not tend to give him a sense of security.

"As I told you, pardner, one of the scamps shot at me. I jist caught the bullet in my mouth, an' no harm was done!"

Mesquite Mat had heard that, too, but was not ready to believe it.

Hy Hiram held up his hand with a card in it, and rattled on.

"The fact is, pardner, that I bear a charmed life. Takes a gold bullet to hit me—a bullet of pure gold! My mammy was a witch and my daddy was a wizard, and, as I was born to be drowned in the sea, it's a dead sure thing that I can't be killed out here on the plains. So, you see, I'm inclined sometimes to git a little bit reckless."

Hy Hiram's statements and the presence of that bomb on the table seemed to deprive the gambler of his usual nerve and luck. It seemed to him he had never played so poorly. He did not believe everything Hy Hiram had told him any more than he believed everything his frightened men had told him.

Yet he believed that in the man who sat at the opposite side of the table, whose throat moved so queerly, and whose voice chirruped so strangely, he beheld a foe who was more to be dreaded than any he had ever met.

And in this estimation he was correct. In Hy Hiram, the Texan Detective, he had an enemy worthy of his steel!

CHAPTER XIII.

FRIGHTENED LONE STARS.

When the game ended, Hy Hiram left the Maverick Corral and lost himself to view in the street. He had won, by long odds, and a good portion of the wad of greenbacks of which he had spoken rested snugly in one of his pockets.

Though he had departed from the Maverick Corral, he soon came back to it, with his hat pulled over his eyes, and, standing in a shadowed alley not far distant, he watched the door of the building closely, observing who came out and who went in.

It was late before Mesquite Mat emerged, but when he did so Hy Hiram followed him softly, keeping well to the rear and out of sight.

Mesquite Mat moved down a side street to an empty one-story frame school building, which he entered.

The school house stood apart from any other structure, and the Texan Detective observed that a light burned dimly within it, and that the Weasel walked to and fro near the door, evidently on duty there as a guard.

His suspicions were instantly aroused.

The school building had a vestibule, and, at one side, an anteroom, with a door opening into it from the vestibule; but this door was closed and locked.

Hy Hiram was resolved to know what was going on within that house.

He picked up a stone and pitched it across the building, and, when the stone fell on the other side, making a slight noise, the Weasel scudded to that side to ascertain its meaning.

Thus for a moment the way was clear; and, taking advantage of his successful ruse, Hy Hiram tiptoed into the vestibule, where he drew a skeleton key from his pocket, quickly opened the locked door, and let himself into the anteroom.

He was safe and had the door closed and locked before Weasel William returned.

He now learned that there were several men in the room, who were talking in low tones. Through a convenient keyhole he could see them sitting about a table, and he recognized two of them as Mesquite Mat and Silver Sol.

He quickly discovered that this was a pretended meeting of the board of commissioners of Maverick County, with other officers, and that they were engaged in issuing \$100,000 worth of county bonds for a mythical railroad of which there had recently been much talk. No one believed such a railroad was to be built, but there had been a sham railway election, and now the Maverick County officials were finishing their part of the thieving work.

Hy Hiram also learned that these bonds were to be sent East for sale by a certain firm, who were leagued with the Maverick boodlers; that \$50,000 of court house bonds had already been sold at thirty cents on the dollar, and that \$20,000 had been realized by the purchase of coyote scalps.

No greater proof was needed to show the desperate and determined character of the men who recognized Mesquite Mat as their head.

The coming election was to be to them a life and death struggle. If they could carry it, the county would be ruined and they would be rich.

They were saying as much, while they signed and numbered the bonds and discussed their plans.

Though this was supposed to be a public meeting of public officers, the fact that it was being held surreptitiously, with a guard at the door, was sufficient to show its character.

They spoke of the opposition of Judge Gale and the trouble he had given them.

"But he's where he can't do us any more hurt now!" Mesquite Mat declared, with a grin of satisfaction. "I only wish I had that sport and the other fellow the same way. Do you know, I am terrible afraid of that Hy Hiram. To my mind, he's a more dangerous man than this Sport from Spokane. To tell you the truth, I think both of them are detectives!"

Mesquite Mat was not saying something he had not said before. He had reiterated this belief on several occasions.

"That Hy Hiram is a queer cub!"

"Better say dog!" said Silver Sol. "What with that chirrurin' and barkin', he is more of a dog than any human critter ever I seen!"

"You've got the plans all laid for that big hold-up, have you, Sol?"

"Everything down fine! I have even—"

He was interrupted by Weasel William, who opened the door, and, thrusting his head through, excitedly whispered.

"I say, pards, hanged if they hain't a man under the house!"

The boddlers were thrown into a panic of fear, and questioned him eagerly.

The Weasel had been very uneasy ever since he had heard the sound made when Hy Hiram pitched the stone over the house, and he had been poking around trying to determine the cause of the noise.

Placed there as a guard, he felt that his reputation was at stake, and, besides, his weasely disposition made him happier when engaged in prying work.

He had discovered, finally, that one of the boards of the foundation in front of the house was loose. The house sat a foot or two above the ground, with a wooden foundation wall.

Peering under the house through the hole made by the slipping aside of the board, he had beheld the outline of a form and had seen a pair of eyes, hence had leaped to the conclusion, knowing that detectives were on the trail of these men.

He quickly explained the nature of his discovery, and the men hastened out of the building with him and spread themselves around the house to prevent the escape of the supposed spy.

"He must be killed," Mesquite Mat hissed. "It'll never do to let him get away. He's heard too much."

With the Weasel and Silver Sol, Mesquite Mat knelt at the opening near the front door, and looked beneath the floor.

They were very careful not to expose themselves any more than was necessary, for it seemed likely the spy was armed and might shoot when he found he was caught.

Apparently the spy had heard the talk, for, when they looked under, he could not be seen. However, it was not believed he had got out, for the Weasel had hardly taken his eyes from the aperture.

"There he is!"

Weasel William squeaked the words, and the others now beheld the dim outline and saw the eyes.

"Will a man's eyes shine that way?" was Mat's incredulous question.

"Yes, in the dark. They'll shine just like the eyes of an animal. There, he's turned his head aside."

The shining eyes disappeared and came into view again.

"Come out of there!" Mesquite Mat commanded. "If you don't, we'll shoot you. We've got you treed, so you might as well come out. If you make a fight, we'll burn the building over you!"

The Texan Detective, concealed in the little anteroom not a dozen feet distant, wondered who it could be that was under the house, and thrilled with an uneasy fear when he thought of the Sport from Spokane.

All were in a quiver of excitement.

"I'll give you ten dollars, Weasel, if you'll go under there and see if that's an animal or a man!"

The Weasel drew back with a shrug.

"Thank ye, I don't want to order my coffin yit. Go under yourself!"

Mesquite Mat stooped down again and saw the form and the burning eyes.

"I'll pretend I think it's an animal, and I'll be all right, whatever it is. There's no danger of bein' arrested fer shootin' an animal!"

He had drawn his revolver, and now he fired quickly.

The revolver shot was answered by a wild screech that was anything but human, and, before Mesquite Mat knew what had happened, the object he had fired at was out of the hole, had bowled him over, and was on top of him.

The yell he let out was enough to raise the dead.

His pals were no less frightened, and, instead of rushing to his assistance, they began to scatter. But the cries he uttered drew them back.

Then they saw that the creature was a wild cat. The shot had merely wounded and enraged it, and it was using its claws on Mat with tearing effect.

The knowledge that it was only an animal, though so dangerous a one, somewhat restored Silver Sol's courage, and, running to his chief's assistance, he thrust the revolver against the brute's head and blew its brains out.

Mesquite Mat clambered to his feet, torn and bleeding, and with such a lack of strength in his legs that he could hardly stand.

The others swarmed back.

Then they grew very bold when they saw that the wild cat was dead and that Mesquite Mat was unharmed.

"Where's the Weasel? I ought to kick him out of town for that!"

But Mesquite Mat reserved his kick, and contented himself with roundly berating Weasel William.

Then they went back into the house, hastily concluded the business that had brought them there, and departed, leaving Hy Hiram chuckling in the anteroom.

CHAPTER XIV.

A RACE AGAINST TIME.

Delaven Dare, the railway telegraph operator at Maverick City, sat in his little room, with the instruments clicking about him, and half-dozed, for the hour was late and he was growing sleepy.

He had to remain at the office, however, until the three o'clock Express arrived from the East, which was not due for nearly an hour.

He was aroused from this somnolent condition by the door being flung open. Three men entered the room, men with hats slouched over their eyes. But Delaven Dare, used to the rough appearance of the men of that region, did not think their presence a menace.

"Can I send a telegram yit to-night?" one of them asked, in a gruff voice, stepping close up to Dare and thrusting out a paper.

The movement was a ruse, for he instantly dropped the paper, and, seizing Dare by the throat, dragged him from behind the railing, with which the Maverick City operator hedged himself from the traveling public, and threw him roughly on the floor.

"No use kickin'. I've got you foul!"

He put a foot on Dare's chest and thrust a pistol into Dare's face.

The scared operator repressed the cry that rose to his lips, and looked up anxiously.

He observed now, for the first time, that the men were masked, and that each black mask bore in the center of the upper part a white star.

He was somewhat familiar with the doings of the Lone Stars, and his face grew ghastly.

"We won't hurt you if you don't make a row. It's possession of the office we want, not you!"

Though the voice had a familiar ring, Delaven Dare could not place it. He was sure it was disguised.

The ruffian held him thus with foot and revolver, while his companions seized his hands and feet and securely bound them.

Then he was dumped into the farthest corner of the room and commanded to remain quiet there under pain of death.

A footstep sounded on the plank walk, and Delaven Dare, in spite of his great fear, tried to cry out.

One of the Lone Stars seized him by the throat and held him quiet until the noise of the footsteps had subsided.

"Try that trick again, will ye?"

With this the road-agent struck Dare heavily on the head with the butt of a revolver, and the agent lay a limp and senseless heap.

"I had a notion of killin' him!" turning to the other Lone Stars. "But he'll keep quiet for a while, I promise you."

Though the footsteps had subsided, the one outside had not departed from the vicinity. He was the Sport from Spokane, and his keen ears had caught the quickly-suppressed sound made by the lips of the operator.

He knew that something was amiss, but he was too old a bird to betray himself or walk blindly into a trap, and so, while he pretended to depart from the vicinity of the depot, he really went away but a few steps, and then stealthily crept back.

When the Lone Star made that blood-thirsty statement, the Sport from Spokane had his face at the window, while he himself was concealed in the gloom.

One of them, who was an operator, went to the instrument and clicked off a message to Weatherford; but as the message was in cipher, the Sport from Spokane, though he could read and send the Morse code, could make neither head nor tail of it.

A reply came back, almost instantly, but it, too, was in cipher.

When they had received this message the Lone Stars walked over to where the operator was lying still senseless, and, after examining him, they turned out the light, went out on the platform and locked the door.

The Sport from Spokane heard them steal away through the darkness.

Then he was startled by a call and a query, on the instrument. This call and query kept coming, though it remained unanswered.

Then came the message:

"The Eastern Express is to be wrecked and robbed at Canyon Diablo. Man captured here has just made a confession."

It was important information.

It came again, word for word, and the Sport from Spokane, knowing it ought to be replied to instantly, pushed up the window by which he was standing, leaped into the room, and ran to the instrument.

Hardly had he done so when another form appeared at the window—the form of Hy Hiram.

The latter had been passing along, and the open window and the tick of the telegraph sounder had drawn him. He, too, could read and send the Morse code.

He was astonished beyond measure when he looked cautiously through the window and saw the dim form of the man at the instrument and the other dim form lying by the wall.

The light was of the poorest, but, fortunately, his eyes were of the keenest, and from the outline of the form and the movements of the instrument, he knew this man to be the Sport from Spokane. The knowledge did not lessen his bewilderment.

"I tried to catch you, but couldn't! The Express which has left here is to be wrecked at Canyon Diablo. Man—"

It was a repetition of the message of warning already sent from Rocky Gulch. The sport had answered, and the man at Rocky Gulch supposed the sport to be the regular operator at Maverick City.

Nothing further was required to acquaint the Texan Detective with the situation. Instant action was needed, and he leaped through the window, announcing himself.

"Sling 'em back an answer, pardner!" he chirruped. "There's a railway velocipede out here that'll carry two men. We've got to make Canyon Diablo ahead

of that Express, or it's good-by. Express! Telegrams can't do it any good now!"

He leaped out of the window and sought the velocipede in the little house where it was kept, while the Sport from Spokane inquired of the operator at Gulch City further particulars.

The man captured at Gulch City had not confessed in time to get a warning to the imperiled train, which was now speeding from Gulch City toward Maverick City. It was supposed that the Lone Stars were the wreckers.

The sport tried to arouse the station agent. He was sure the operator was not seriously hurt, and would receive assistance by and by. Not a minute could be lost in delay.

Hy Hiram had the velocipede on the rails and was ready to move when the sport leaped out of the telegraph office.

In an instant, almost, they were moving toward Canyon Diablo, their speed momentarily increasing.

The railway velocipede can be sent over the rails with considerable rapidity if propelled by strong arms and legs, and the detectives did not spare their strength in this emergency. It fairly whizzed through the cuts and around the curves, with a rumbling "br-r-r-r" as if it were some gigantic night insect.

The Sport from Spokane had brought the operator's lantern, but he did not venture to light it, and would not even try to strike a match, though he was almost wild to know how the time was speeding.

"We'll just make it by the skin of our teeth, if we make it at all!"

"Do you reckon that operator was in the plot?" Hy Hiram asked, as they flew across a trestle.

"I think not, though he might have been shamming. That fellow seemed to pat him on the head in good earnest!"

One mile wheeled backward, then another and another.

They cautiously stopped the velocipede in a cut, lifted it from the rails, and ran forward toward the canyon.

Canyon Diablo was a big gash in the earth made by nature, and was spanned by a long-legged, stilted bridge that, to look at, seemed very shaky and unsafe.

Turning a curve, they saw the train-wreckers just ahead of them, at work prying up the rails in the center of the bridge and letting them drop into the chasm. The wreckers were working with speed, though they stopped, now and then, to listen, thus showing that the train was nearly due.

Then the roar of the train was heard. It was not a great distance down the track, and coming with Express train speed. The crowding hills had shut out the roar till that moment.

The detectives started as they heard the sound. Not a moment was there to lose. Yet they hesitated, uncertain what to do.

At length Hy Hiram put a hand in a pocket and brought out one of the bombs.

"It's the only thing!"

The train-wreckers, having done their work of tearing up the track, scudded from the bridge, and, fortunately for the success of Hy Hiram's plan, ran to the opposite side of the canyon, and disappeared from view among the rocks.

Without further explanation the Texan Detective darted toward the bridge.

The train had rushed into sight, and now its fiery headlight illumined the track for some distance in advance; but the light did not show the men on the engine that the rails had been torn up. There were many shadows thrown by the hills and the rocks, and perhaps these shadows kept the engineer from seeing the peril into which the train was rushing.

It was another race against time; a race between the Express train and the Texan Detective, with considerable doubt as to whether Hy Hiram could reach the canyon soon enough to put into execution his plan for saving the train.

CHAPTER XV.

THWARTING THE TRAIN-WRECKERS.

The bomb which Hy Hiram held was of glass, and filled only with gunpowder and a fulminating compound, as were

most of the so-called bombs which he had displayed.

He really carried one or two dynamite bombs, which he handled with a great caution.

With the gunpowder bombs, however, he was always reckless enough to blanch the cheeks of those who believed them to contain the deadly dynamite. It had been a gunpowder bomb he had hurled into the fire, and so succeeded in rescuing Gladys Gale.

Holding his bomb now, ready for a throw, he ran with all speed straight toward the bridge, which he reached while the engine was yet a hundred yards away.

The engineer must have seen him, for Hy Hiram leaped into the full glare of the headlight, as he hurled the bomb across the bridge toward the engine.

It struck and exploded, with a loud report.

At almost the same instant, a revolver spouted its fire from the rocky region into which the wreckers had run, and the bullet from the revolver cut through Hiram's coat.

The Texan leaped to one side, into the shadow, fearing another shot, and heard, with deep thankfulness, the down break whistles of the engine and the heavy grinding of the brakes on the wheels.

He reeled and almost fell from the reaction of feeling, when he knew he had been in time and that the train was saved.

But it was a narrow shave, after all. The engine came to a full stop on the very brink of the canyon. Two yards more, or the fraction of a second of time, would have put it on the broken track and perhaps would have hurled it and the train into the depths.

The Sport from Spokane bounded to the side of the Texan Detective.

The passengers and trainmen were excitedly swarming out of the coaches and asking innumerable questions.

The balked wreckers had betaken themselves to flight for safety.

A man ran across the broken track swinging a lantern, and stood before the detectives, querying them.

Hy Hiram was recovering his equanimity, and, taking on himself the duties of spokesman, he answered in his wordy way, while his face shone under the glare of the headlight.

Then the Sport from Spokane stood as if petrified, while his eyes seemed popping out of his head, as he stared at a man who was stepping toward him over the bridge.

"My God, pard! Look there! That's Judge Gilbert Gale!"

Hy Hiram was too astounded to reply.

A man with grizzled beard and hair, who was in age somewhere between fifty and sixty, and whose face indicated sternness and firmness—that was what he beheld.

And that was Judge Gale, the father of Gladys Gale—the man believed to be dead, and so mourned by his daughter and friends.

It was a bewildering, inexplicable revelation.

In that instant, the Texan Detective understood the full import of this attempt of the Lone Stars; that not only was the train to have been robbed, but they, knowing that Judge Gale was returning to Maverick City on it, had thought to kill him, along with the other passengers—the sacrifice of human life being as nothing to them.

The trainmen and passengers were gathering thickly about the two detectives, and it now developed that they had fancied the explosion that of a railway torpedo, placed on the rail. Their amazement and gratitude were great when they knew the truth.

Rapidly Hy Hiram narrated how they had discovered the plot and had hastened to thwart it.

"Gents, a vote of thanks don't do in a case of this kind."

One of the passengers was gratefully beginning to pass a hat for a collection, failing to understand the character of

the men whose promptness and courage had saved them from death.

"Pardners, we couldn't think of making it seem that we're a kind of a joint hospital beggin' fer funds," and the puppy dog clicked amusedly. "Keep ye'r cash to pay hotel bills up at Maverick. You'll need all of it 'fore you git away from that there burg. As fer us, we're mill-yunaires and bank presidents and don't need any dust."

The Sport from Spokane had not taken his eyes from the face of Judge Gale. The sight not only gratified him, but it dazed him, and made him almost superstitious for the moment.

He had, as he had believed, seen Judge Gale lying dead, while the murderer was holding up his hands under the persuasion of the pistols of Mesquite Mat. Then the sport had been separated from the judge by the rush of the mounted Lone Stars.

He knew now he had not seen correctly, for here was the judge, alive and well, thrusting out his hand in recognition and asking about Gladys and the people of Maverick.

"She is well, though she has grieved you as dead, as I have. How you escaped death is a mystery. I would have sworn that I saw you lying dead—I did swear to it, to everybody."

The judge drew him away from the crowd that had collected about the Texan Detective.

"It's all very easy of explanation. I wasn't killed, of course. I was following the Lone Stars in disguise. A certain rascal named Sturgis Bill was deputed by Mesquite Mat to murder me, and he came on me in the broken country, not far from Maverick City. He brought me down with a pistol ball—"

He lifted his hat and showed a red scar on the scalp where the sport had seen the bloody wound.

"He thought he had killed me, I guess, and began to rob my pockets, when Mesquite Mat came on him and held him up."

"I learned all this afterward, for, of course, at the time I didn't know anything."

"Then I was seized and carried into the hills by the band of Lone Stars, and was held by them there, in a cave, until day before yesterday, when I succeeded in making my escape."

"When I was first taken there it was an even question whether I was to die or live, but my strong constitution pulled me through!"

"Sturgis Bill was shot by Mesquite Mat and killed because he sought to rob me and beat the Lone Star band out of that much booty."

"When they saw I was going to get well, they held a meeting and discussed whether they should not kill me, too, but finally they decided to hold me, thinking some of them might fall into the hands of the officers, and that they could probably purchase their freedom by exchanging me."

"Thank Heaven, you are still alive! It will overjoy your daughter—and we need you now more than ever. We've fairly got the Lone Stars on the run as it is. With your help, we'll rout them!"

"They must have feared something like that. When I got away I made straight for the nearest railway point. Probably they received word that I had reached the railway and had taken this train, and hoped to kill me by wrecking the train."

"I am sure you are correct in that," the sport averred. "The thing was hastily planned."

Further talk was impossible at that time.

A band of men was being got together to go in pursuit of the wreckers, and the sport was asked as to the supposed direction which they had taken and other queries relative to the proposed chase.

He whispered something in the ear of Judge Gale, then called to the Texan Detective and introduced them.

"Must happy to make your acquaintance, judge!" with a chirrup and a bow. "Never was more tickled, except when my baby sister used to scratch my feet

with a straw. Will I go home with you? Most certainly, and jump at the chance."

"I'm going to accompany the hunters. Maybe we can corral the rascals somewhere, or wipe 'em out in a fight. It would be a good riddance."

The Sport from Spokane, having brought together the men who were to be so much to each other in the fight that was now on, separated from them and put himself at the head of the party that was forming, offering his services as guide.

The searchers left the train immediately, and made as thorough a hunt of the vicinity as they could; though they had not great hopes of being able to do anything worthy of the name till the coming of day, which was now close at hand.

The track was re-laid, and the train went on to Maverick City, with Hy Hiram and Judge Gilbert Gale.

As soon as it was light enough to see, the searching party, led by the sport, returned to the bridge over the canyon and picked up the trail.

The sport was an excellent trailer himself, but there chanced to be in the party an old Indian fighter and cowboy, whose service proved invaluable.

This man's eyes possessed the keenness of an eagle's, and he saw marks and read signs where ordinary men beheld nothing but rocks and sand. He called himself Yuma Pete, and he certainly had much of the wonderful trailing power of the Yuma Indians.

He found the trail of the wreckers, with the sport's help, in the bottom of the draw, whither the wreckers had fled after firing at the Texan Detective; and from that on it was close work, and fast work, too, for Yuma Pete trotted along, with his eyes on the ground, traveling over the difficult way as rapidly as if he were a keen-scented hound depending on the sense of smell instead of the sense of sight.

For three hours he led the party on, the trailing growing warmer and warmer.

"Pards, they're jist over there!"

Halting and following the direction indicated by his finger, the faint upcurling of a thin column of smoke could be seen.

Every nerve thrilled in anticipation of a fight, and fingers clutched revolvers nervously.

Like a snake, Yuma Pete wriggled to the top of the nearest hill, and stared down into the hollow from whence the smoke ascended.

What he saw caused him to draw his belt tighter, as if for a struggle, and his face to light with fierce joy.

A half dozen men were camped in front of a face of rock, where grew some bushes and vines, sure sign of the presence there of a spring. They seemed all unaware of danger; and the fact that their trail had been followed, without break, from the bridge, told that they were the train wreckers.

Yuma Pete slipped down the slope as softly as he had gone up it, and excitedly whispered his information.

Quickly the Sport from Spokane, who had come to be recognized as the leader of the party, gave his instructions. They were to creep as close to their foes as possible, then open fire and make a rush.

The ascent of the divide, that separated them from the hollow where the Lone Stars were camped, occupied some time, as every movement had to be performed with the greatest caution.

Then all lay on the crest of the divide and looked down on the sight, which, up to that moment, only the keen eyes of Yuma Pete had beheld.

The sport uttered a low exclamation of disappointment. The distance was greater to the outlaw camp-fire than he had anticipated, and the revolvers of his followers would not do much execution. And there was no cover by which they could make a nearer approach without discovery.

However, there was no help for it, and he gave the orders to fire simultaneously—then to charge at a dead run, working the revolvers while the run was being made.

The Lone Stars were taken completely

by surprise. One fell, killed at the first fire, and, to the bewilderment of the charging party, the others dived behind the screen of bushes and disappeared.

The blood of the trainmen and passengers was up, however, and heeding not the peril into which they might be running, they dashed up to the bushy screen.

The Lone Stars had dived into a hole in the rock behind the bushes and vines, and had sought concealment in a cavern.

The pursuers, disappointed beyond measure, halted to consult.

The party divided, and one band watched this entrance, while the other party climbed the hill and descended to the opposite side to ascertain if there was any egress for the hunted men.

No egress was found, and it seemed certain the opening at the front was the only one.

What to be done was a matter difficult to say. There was little doubt, apparently, that the Lone Stars were hid in the recesses of the cave, in which case they could readily pick off any one daring enough to push in after them.

A great heap of brush and wood, mostly mesquite, was piled in front of the mouth of the cave and set on fire.

A dense volume of smoke rolled into the cave, showing a draft of air, and the party stood about the entrance, with weapons ready, like a lot of boys standing around a rabbit or woodchuck hole, undergoing the process of "smoking out."

But the outlaws did not appear, though the smoke was kept rolling into the cave for half a day, and until it seemed certain the Lone Stars could not be in there and live.

The fire was permitted to die out and the smoke to drift away. Then the sport and Yuma Pete led four of the most daring of the party into the cavern, from which all the smoke had not yet been driven.

They could advance but a short distance before they were compelled to prepare torches.

By the light of the torches they thoroughly searched the cavern, which was of considerable extent, and showed many signs of occupancy.

Then they came to the aperture through which the outlaws had made their escape. It was a ragged hole opening into a canyon.

There was no doubt the outlaws had fled by means of it, as soon as the front entrance was blocked, and that they were far distant.

A half day had been lost, and the outlaws were given so great a start that they could not be successfully trailed. In spite of the great skill of Yuma Pete, the trail was lost on the rocky slope a mile from the cavern, and could not be refound.

They kept tenaciously to the work, however, until nightfall, then gave it up and went back to the mouth of the cave, intending to get the body of the outlaw killed there and convey it to Maverick City.

The Sport from Spokane had recognized the dead outlaw as a man well known in Maverick City, and an associate of Mesquite Mat and his brother gamblers, and he wanted to exhibit the body to the people of the town to show them the kind of men engaged in the attempt to wreck the train.

But some of the wary outlaws had returned and borne the body away.

It was a great disappointment to the sport.

All were tired, footsore and hungry, but, fortunately, when they reached the railway they found the bridge repaired and a train due, and, flagging this train, they were quickly whirled to Maverick City.

CHAPTER XVI.

JUDGE GALE DEFIES HIS ENEMIES.

Judge Gale and the Texan Detective had a long and earnest talk on their way to Maverick City, and the result was the getting together of a body of men who were known to be friends, for the purpose of visiting the place where the judge had been held as a prisoner.

The judge's reappearance in Maverick City produced a tremendous sensation. That he was dead had been accepted as correct by nearly every one, and to see him walking about the streets was almost like looking on a dead man who had come back to life. His adherents were pleased and made more confident and jubilant.

Gladys Gale was hysterical through very joy. She felt that she could not leave him again for an instant, and she clung to him, begging him to let the Lone Stars go and not put himself in peril.

Judge Gale desired to have Mesquite Mat and the leaders of the band placed under arrest, and would probably have done so but for the knowledge that little could be accomplished thereby.

He could only set up his word against theirs. That he had seen them and recognized them would not avail against their positive denials. The town was half, or more than half, in sympathy with the gamblers. The most the judge could expect would be a disagreeing jury, at the end of a tedious trial, and that could do no good.

It required a half day's ride to take the party to the point where the judge had been held, and when they reached it, they found the ride fruitless.

The Lone Stars, certain the place would be sought, and that they could no longer consider themselves safe there, had hastily abandoned it.

On his return to town Judge Gale had a consultation with the young woman he had employed as editress of the Maverick "Brand."

The result was that the paper, which appeared the next morning, held a two-column article from his pen, which recounted the history of the past few days and issued a defiance to his enemies.

That afternoon a nominating convention met, which named a ticket, and placed at its head the name of Judge Gilbert Gale as a candidate for representative, in opposition to Matthew Moriarty—Mesquite Mat—who headed the ticket already in the field.

Thus the issues were made, and the fight was on.

It could be seen that Judge Gale's presence in the camp depressed and discouraged his foes. His coming had been like a bomb hurled into their midst.

Though the columns of the "Brand" now fairly sparkled, hurling charge after charge against Mesquite Mat and his cohorts, these charges were, of course, all pooh-poohed as ridiculous and absurd by those against whom they were aimed.

Diana Temple was the embodiment of editorial energy and fire, and the Sport from Spokane looking at her and musing on the position she occupied, bewilderedly wondered what there had been in her visit to Gladys Gale that had made Gladys so excited on that evening of the drugging, of his coffee.

Always his thoughts went back to the mystery of the drugged coffee without being able to reach any solution.

Now he started, as a new idea came to him.

He had many times tried to recall the tones of the person who had whispered into his ears when the cowboys were raiding the Maverick Corral, and now, hearing Diana speak, it came to him that hers was the voice that had urged him to stand by Judge Gale, and to fight this fight to the bitter end.

While the sport and the judge were talking with Diana Temple in the office of the Maverick "Brand," quite a different conversation, but one destined to affect them, was being held in another part of the town.

"I'm sure the men were this Sport from Spokane and Hy Hiram!"

Delaven Dare, the telegraph operator, made the statement, directing his words to the chief of police of Maverick City.

Others had been called into the office of the chief of police to hear the story, told by Delaven Dare.

Dare was speaking of the men who had tied him up that night at the station.

He had seen the men as they entered; and then had been bound and knocked senseless by the butt of a pistol, as will be remembered. But he had not been senseless when Hy Hiram and the Sport from Spokane left the office, as they had supposed.

He had recovered consciousness while they were talking together in the office, and he had heard the message sent by the operator at Rocky Gulch to him, warning him of the contemplated wreck.

As he was left bound, he could do nothing until the train arrived filled with the excited passengers.

When he called for assistance, was released, and was on the point of naming Caleb Strong and Hy Hiram as men to be arrested, the account of how they had saved the train from the wreckers silenced him.

So, at the time, he had only told how the office had been entered and he bound and left helpless.

The loud praises with which the town rang concerning the bravery of Strong and Hy Hiram tended for a time to make him think he might have been mistaken.

But the more he thought over the matter the more certain he had become that they were the men he had seen, and now he was recounting his story to the chief of police.

It was listened to with marked interest, for the chief, as well as the men called in to hear the narrative, were friends of Mesquite Mat.

Warrants were prepared for the arrest of Hy Hiram and the Sport from Spokane, and Delavan Dare departed, feeling that, at great risk, he had done his duty.

"Boys, we couldn't have ordered anything better to our notion," the chief declared, smacking his lips with pleasure. "I'll have the cinches on them two detectives in less than no time, and I'll draw 'em tight. It's known by everybody that Dare don't belong to our crowd, which is a mighty big point in our favor. Oh, I tell you, we'll jest do 'em up, now."

CHAPTER XVII. THE BLOW FALLS.

The chief of police had said he would immediately arrest the detectives; but before doing so, he went in search of Mesquite Mat for purposes of consultation, and Mesquite Mat's fertile brain sought to add to the evidence offered by the operator.

Abel Annandale, a merchant of Maverick City, who had recently been induced by a love of money to throw in his fortunes with the followers of Mesquite Mat, was brought forward with a corroborating and strengthening story.

This story was sensational in the extreme, and was to the effect that Abel Annandale had seen the detectives engaged in removing the rails from the track at the Diablo Canyon bridge.

The blow fell most unexpectedly, and at a moment when the detectives and Judge Gale fancied they had their foes on the run.

The serving of the warrants was a funny affair, even though so serious.

The chief of police, believing he had desperate men to deal with, gathered a half-score of followers and went to the office of the Maverick "Brand," where it was reported the detectives were to be found.

Leaving his men outside, the chief walked into the room and ostentatiously drew the warrants out of his pocket.

"These two gentlemen, known as Hy Hiram and Caleb Strong, will consider themselves under arrest, for having attempted to wreck the Eastern Express on the Texas and Pacific Railway, on the night of the ninth."

He blew his nose violently, and looked at his prisoners, who had risen to their feet.

Consternation shone in the face of Judge Gale, but the countenances of the detectives were impassive.

Then the puppy dog broke the silence that followed the announcement.

"Ah, my friend, who brings this charge?" questioned Gale.

"Delavan Dare, the railway operator, and Abel Annandale. Dare recognized these men in the telegraph office, and Annandale saw them tearing up the rails. He slipped by them, put a large rifle cartridge on the rail beyond the bridge, which the engine exploded, and which saved the train.

"It has been supposed all along that one of Mr. Hy Hiram's bombs was what had exploded, but Mr. Annandale is ready to state otherwise, and he is a citizen of untarnished reputation."

The chief of police was unable to conceal his victorious joy.

"And so you want to board us a while? Very well, we'll go with you; eh, pardner?" chirped Hy Hiram.

The Adam's apple hopped up and down in great glee, and an outsider would have been led to think that Hy Hiram fancied an honor was being done him or that the whole thing was a joke.

"You will surrender your weapons, and those bombs, Mr. Hiram, if you please!"

Hy Hiram laughed shrilly.

"You're the first man that I ever could induce to take charge of one of these things. Give 'em to you? Why, certainly! Air you good on the ketch?"

He drew out a large and formidable-looking one from a deep pocket in the tail of his coat, and seemed on the point of tossing it to the chief of police as if it were only an apple.

The chief fell back, with a cry of terror, and his men fairly tumbled over each other trying to get away from the door.

It would have been an easy matter for Hy Hiram to clear the room by hurling some of the bombs at these foes, and quite as easy for him and his friend to escape from the place under cover of the confusion created. But this was not in accordance with his ideas of what should be done.

"Put it down there on the table!" yelled the chief, stepping gingerly about. "Do you want to kill us all, with the infernal thing? Put it down on the table!"

Hy Hiram laughed till his sides shook, and his face wrinkled until his eyes could hardly be seen.

"Why, there's no harm in the thing, if you don't let it fall. You ought to be able to ketch as big a thing as that! Mebbe it'll fall off'n the table!"

"Put it on the floor, then!" the chief commanded.

Hy Hiram obediently placed the bomb on the floor, then drew out another from the tail pocket of his coat and laid it beside the first.

The side pockets of the same garment yielded up a couple more, and then smaller ones came from his hip pockets, from his trousers pockets and his vest pockets, until a whole nest of them, big and little, and of various shapes, rested in a heap in the middle of the room.

The eyes of the chief and the men were glued to these things in a way that was extremely funny to witness, and Miss Diana Temple and Judge Gale seemed not to have much more of a fondness for them. Only the Sport from Spokane stood his ground with Hy Hiram.

Then the sport handed over his revolvers, and, after several anxious looks, the chief came forward, with the intention of putting irons on their wrists.

The sport drew back.

"None of that. We'll go with you peaceably, but you shall not iron us."

The chief had stepped close up to Hy Hiram and now grasped him somewhat roughly by the shoulder.

"Hold! Hold!" Hy Hiram yelled. "Bu'st me if I didn't fergit one of 'em!"

He threw the chief off, with a wild gesture; and, diving into one of his boot-legs, drew out a bomb that was no bigger than a pigeon egg.

"The deadliest of the whole lot, and so little that I forgot it! Why, gentlemen, that would take every one of us into kingdom come in less'n three seconds!"

The chief fairly shivered with fear.

"How am I goin' to manage these hyar things?" was his helpless question.

"Well, I can inform you you're not at liberty to leave them here on the office floor," was Diana Temple's curt statement.

The chief looked appealingly at his men.

"Git a basket, one of you, an' put these things in it, and carry 'em like they was eggs. Hanged if I know what to do with 'em! I'd tell you to drop 'em into the fu'st well you come to, but of course the plaguy things 'd go off and tear up the whole town."

The basket was procured and the bombs placed in it with gingerly care, and then the march to the jail was begun, through the principal street, where crowds gathered to look at the men who were charged with the terrible crime of train-wrecking.

These crowds followed to the jail, and began to clamor for the lives of the prisoners.

It was observable that Mesquite Mat and Abel Annandale were conspicuous in their efforts to arouse the spirit of mob violence.

"Pard, we're goin' to have trouble," declared Hy Hiram, as he looked out through the barred window.

CHAPTER XVIII.

DIANA TEMPLE TO THE RESCUE.

Hardly had the prisoners been taken from the office of the Maverick "Brand" when Diana Temple departed therefrom and made her way in the direction of Mesquite Mat's gambling house.

She did not enter it, but, meeting one of Mesquite Mat's friends, she requested him to ask Mesquite Mat to call immediately at the office of the "Brand," as she must see him without delay on a matter of importance.

The man hastened away to obey the injunction, and she returned to the office, where she awaited with impatience the gambler's coming.

She sat down at the desk to write, but her nervousness was so great that she got up and walked the floor until Mesquite Mat appeared.

He had been found with the crowd in front of the jail.

He took off his hat and bowed respectfully, as he walked through the doorway. She closed the door and pushed him a chair.

"I have sent for you to ask a favor and make a demand."

She looked even prettier than usual, as she sat opposite to him, her face flushed and her eyes sparkling with excitement.

"I have promised to marry you, but I haven't married you yet! Whether I do or not depends! You tried to have Judge Gale assassinated—"

"I—"

"No use denying it to me! You know, too, that the charges against the men who were arrested in the office a while ago are not true. I demand their release!"

"It can't be done."

A frown settled on his sullen face and he sat firmly in the chair.

"It can't be done!"

"What is it to you?"

"One of those men favored me very much, once—put me under everlasting obligations. He does not recall it, or even remember me; but I shall never forget it!"

"It don't lay with me to say whether they will be released or not. I didn't have 'em arrested. I'm not backing the mob that's wantin' to hang 'em."

"It isn't pretty to tell a man he lies, else I might say it to you. I simply say that you prevaricate, Mr. Moriarty. You are wabbling from the straight line of truth. It's too bad that your to-be wife should say so, I suppose!"

There was no relenting in his face.

She bent forward and whispered:

"Maybe this will take the stiffness out of your back. I know that you are Dan Creggan, the much-wanted outlaw, who is being hunted on two continents. How did I find it out? Perhaps a little bird whispered it in my ear!"

He glared at her, with sudden fear, and shrank as if struck a blow.

"The secret is perfectly safe with me, Mesquite Mat, but you'll do as I say in this matter. I thought it a good idea to let you know what I know."

"Who told you that business? There ain't a word of truth in it."

Her smile was sweet and winning.

"Now, I'll make you a promise: I'll marry you just one month after the election—if you secure the release of these men and save them from harm at the hands of the mob. I know you can do it!"

For a full minute he did not speak, during which time she sought to read his thoughts.

"As I told you, I'm not the king-pin in this business, but I'll do what I can."

She rose from her chair, put her arms about his neck and kissed his hard cheek.

"You dear old goose, I frightened you, I'm afraid. I intended to marry you, all along, but you mustn't cross me or vex me. Of course, I'm going to marry you for your money! I'll do a good many things for money, but I'll never go back on a friend who helped me when I needed help, even for money."

"Yes, I'll marry you, and I'll be a good wife, and all that, so long as things go to suit me. When they don't, look out for storms! You see, I'm not deceiving you a bit. You say you're willing to do anything, and will accept me whether I love you or not—but, pshaw! We've talked that over a dozen times!"

"Tell me what you know about that Dan Creegan business!" he demanded.

"Just what I said! I know that you are Dan Creegan! Maybe that's the reason I'm going to marry you! Maybe I admire a man who has got nerve enough to be as big a criminal as Dan Creegan!"

When he had gone from the office, her face took on a serious look. She knew she had put herself in great peril, and that, if she did not conduct herself with much discretion, she would probably become a murdered sweetheart. Mesquite Mat was a dangerous man to deal with.

CHAPTER XIX.

ABEL ANNANDALE'S CHANGE OF FRONT.

"Pard, this is close quarters!"

Ily Hiram was again peering through the barred window, and, though his tone was serious, the puppy dog chirruped as of yore.

"I'm afraid I'm goin' to have to play a strong card. Them bloody butchers out there have got to be scared a little."

The prisoners had been in jail two hours or more, during all of which time the jail had been surrounded by men who showed a murderous desire of dragging them out and hanging them.

The jailer had collected a few men and was standing at the jail door, making a show of defending his charges; but it was quite certain he would yield and let the mob in when the proper moment arrived.

The Texan Detective's words were brought to an abrupt close by a pistol bullet, which struck the window near his head and caused him to duck ludicrously to the floor.

He remained sitting on the floor, and began to twist at the heel of one of his shoes. It unscrewed and came off in his hands.

The shoe heel was hollow, and held some small bright instruments, and a few bits of shiny rubber.

He took out one of the pieces of rubber and a fine flexible tube, and proceeded to blow the rubber into the shape of a ball. Then he tied it so that it held the air with which it was filled.

He held up the object produced, which bore a close resemblance to one of the glass bombs that the chief of police had taken from him.

"Just the thing," said the sport.

"So I calculate that it is!" and he rose and stepped to the window.

The prisoners were really in danger of their lives, as they knew full well. They had nothing with which to defend them-

selves, and the chances were that the jail would soon be taken.

In spite of the danger, the Sport from Spokane looked out on the mob with the Texan Detective.

A dozen men were coming toward the door, bearing a wooden beam, which they purposed using as a battering ram. The jailer was loudly ordering them to desist, but they were not heeding his orders.

At this juncture Ily Hiram thrust his arm through the barred window, and, holding the pretended bomb in full view of the mob, yelled:

"Dynamite!"

The effect was electrical. The men carrying the beam looked up, and, seeing the hand extended as if to hurl the bomb, they dropped the beam and fled with ridiculous haste.

There was a general scattering, and a space in front of the jail was cleared for a distance of fifty yards.

The Texan Detective sank to the floor laughing immoderately, while the puppy dog yelped.

A minute elapsed, when the jailer appeared in front of the window and loudly demanded that the bomb be placed on the floor, as he intended to send one of his men in to get it.

"Here it is! Ketch it!" Ily Hiram shouted, thrusting his hand again through the window, and at sight of the bomb the jailer fled precipitately.

Still holding his hand through the window, with the bomb in full view, Ily Hiram called loudly to the crowd:

"If that feller that's so fond of pistol practice 'll jist take a snap shot at me now, mebber he kin knock this thing out o' my fingers. If he does, there'll be no need of a hangin' bee, fer we'll all go up to the sky together."

But the Lone Star had lost his desire for pistol shooting.

A half hour ensued, during which time the jailer a dozen times demanded that the bomb be surrendered, but as he would not catch it, and none of his men could be induced to go into the jail to get it, it remained in Ily Hiram's possession.

The wonder to all was how Ily Hiram had managed to conceal the dangerous thing from the chief of police.

He was queried by the jailer on this point and "honestly" declared that he had carried it in his "stummick."

At this juncture Abel Annandale made his appearance and mounted a dry goods box in the midst of the mob.

"Fellow citizens," he said, "I must confess to you that I was in error in charging those men with being the train-wreckers. I acted a little hastily. It was dark, of course, and I didn't get to see them as plainly as I could have wished. Since their arrest I have been thinking the thing over, and the more I think about it the more I am forced to the conclusion that they are not the men I saw."

It was a clear backing down from the charges he had so confidently made. There was a stir among the Lone Stars and their supporters. They knew very well that there was something behind this sudden change.

Mesquite Mat had appeared on the scene and nodded in approval of Annandale's words.

"Be sure you're right, then go ahead," that's what old Davy Crockett said; and, if you ain't sure, don't go!"

The Lone Stars echoed Mesquite Mat's sentiment. They were ready to echo anything he might say, even though they didn't understand why he said it.

This interference of Abel Annandale came at a time when it was apparently not much needed. The mob was cowed by the fear of the dynamite bomb.

The Texan Detective, squatting on the floor of the prison, let the air out of the rubber ball that had served him so well, and, unscrewing the heel of his shoe, replaced the article and restored the heel.

The jailer came forward with the chief of police and with Judge Gilbert Gale, a few minutes later, and, halting in front of the window, announced that Judge Gale

had offered himself as bondsman for their release, and had been accepted.

Judge Gale and others had made the offer more than an hour before, and the offer had then been rejected.

"If you'll promise to put down that bomb!"

"The bomb's gone, pardner. Like the cat said about the canary, 'I have e't it!' If you're careful not to punch me about the stummick you're safe!"

The officer did not believe Ily Hiram had "e't" the bomb, and, when he came into the prison he searched Ily Hiram with much gingerly care.

Of course he found nothing, and was astounded beyond measure. The bomb was not seen in Ily Hiram's possession nor in the cell, nor was it to be found on the person of the Sport from Spokane.

It was a bewildering mystery.

The mob was dispersing, many of the men departing with growling comments at the loss of a feast of blood.

But the Lone Stars, sure Mesquite Mat had acted with good reason, held their tongues and quietly departed from the vicinity of the jail.

Those who still remained about the prison fell back discreetly, as the detectives walked out.

This man, who could produce bombs from nowhere, was a man to be respected through fear, if for no other reason!

CHAPTER XX.

Ily HIRAM'S NERVE.

It required some ingenuity on the part of Mesquite Mat to satisfy some of his followers of the wisdom of his release of the prisoners from the jail, at a time when it seemed the mob might have taken them out and hanged them, and so have relieved the Lone Stars of their most dangerous foes.

"I thought it was the best bargain I could make, pardner!"

He was speaking to several of his men in a little room back of the gaming establishment, which he sometimes used for consultation when the gaming-den was empty.

"A trade?"

"Just so! A trade with Miss Diana Temple. She's the life and backbone of that paper, and she promised me that if I'd save these men this time she'd quit work on the 'Brand.' She's going to marry me, you know!"

He drew up proudly.

"Take her out of that office, and what's left of the 'Brand'? and what is left of their campaign?"

The campaign was growing hot. Mesquite Mat was spending money like water to carry the day and win success for the ticket he led.

The election was now but a few days distant, and the shrewdest guessers were puzzled to predict the result.

It was admitted that the arrest of Ily Hiram and the sport, on the charge of trying to wreck the Express, had weakened the cause of Judge Gale, for men are so constituted that many were willing to believe them guilty in spite of later revelations. And, though Abel Annandale had retracted his words, the telegraph operator had not, and the words of Delaven Dare went far with many.

The day following their release from the prison they secured the trial they should have been granted immediately, and were acquitted.

Under close cross-examination, Dare was not able to identify them as the men who had entered the telegraph office first, through the door, and the positive statements of the accused were necessarily given some weight.

So they were again able to walk the streets of Maverick City free from charges of this character, though they knew instinctively that their peril had really increased, and that their foes were only seeking a good opportunity to strike a blow more deadly than any yet delivered.

"In just a month after we win this election and we're dead sure to win it—Diana Temple is going to become Mrs. Moriarty. You bet we'll have a high old

wedding, and we'll make the town feel so gay it won't know itself!"

The prospect was so pleasing that Mesquite Mat led his friends back into the gaming room and up to the bar and treated them to the best the house afforded.

It was quite true that Diana Temple had severed her connection with the Maverick "Brand." Judge Gale was now editing the paper.

"Here's to the health of Miss Diana," said Silver Sol, holding up his glass of liquor and jocundly clinking it against the glasses of his friends. "As Miss Temple, she's a honey! As Mrs. Moriarty, she'll be sweeter than the honeycomb!"

The men cheered the sentiment, and thumped the bar so loudly that the glasses and decanters jingled.

"We'll not only win the election, but we'll down that deuced trio—down them so completely that they'll never want to show their heads again in this camp!"

This confident belief of Mesquite Mat was evidently not shared by the Texan Detective. Neither was he daunted by recent occurrences.

After his release from the jail he walked the streets as carelessly as if peril had never come near him, and, soon after, he sat at one of the gaming tables in the Maverick Corral and played a close game with Silver Sol.

Always in his gaming he picked out some member of the Lone Star band, preferably a leader.

On this night it became plain, before the playing had long progressed, that Silver Sol wanted to pick a quarrel with the man who so coolly opposed him, whose Adam's apple hopped up and down and whose invisible puppy dog barked and cavorted in that peculiarly irritating way.

"You mustn't fergit that you're playin' ag'in a gentleman," was the Texan Detective's observation, after one of Silver Sol's offensive verbal thrusts. "If you claim that you wasn't raised to good manners, of course I'm willin' to overlook—"

Silver Sol glared at him with unutterable fury.

"Do ye know I've a mind to pick ye up and throw ye out the winder?"

Silver Sol had been imbibing too much of the flowing bowl, and his furious glare thereby lost much of its force.

"I wouldn't advise you to do it! You couldn't throw me without throwin' my dynamite, and then things would go to everlastin' smash!"

"Bother your dynamite! You're alw'us bluffin' with it. I sometimes think them things hain't got any dynamite in 'em, or you wouldn't handle 'em so reckless yourself. You prance around with them bombs askin' somebody to strike ye, like a man with a chip on his shoulder. Bah!"

Ily Hiram's smiling face showed not a sign of irritation. It wrinkled as good humoredly and the puppy dog yelped as hilariously as if no storm threatened.

"You can believe that or not, just as you please! If you want to try one of the bombs in that shape, I'm here to accommodate ye, and the bomb with which you blow yerself up won't cost you a cent!"

Silver Sol put down his cards.

"You're a fraud and a liar!" he yelled.

Then he snorted with pain and disgust, for Ily Hiram had placidly reached across the table and taken him by the nose.

He put back his hand to get his revolver, but stayed the motion when he saw the detective's revolver looking him in the face.

"Steady, there, pardner! Steady! I've got the drop on ye!"

Silver Sol fairly turned green with humiliation and fright.

"Yes, you've got the drop on me, curse ye! You wouldn't crow so loud if you hadn't. Put down that there weepin' and give me an even show, and I'll do ye up!"

The Adam's apple hopped up and down and the puppy dog chirruped.

"It's a challenge, is it?"

"Yes, it's a challenge? I challenge you to fight me. Any time and any weepin', jist so you give me an even show!"

A number of men were crowding about the table, but these now startedly fell back.

"Right hyar and now, with this fer the weapon?"

Ily Hiram put down the revolver and placed in the center of the table a bomb. It was irregular in shape, seemed made of iron, and had a fuse attached.

"You set there, and I'll set here, an' I'll put a match to this thing. The feller that sticks to his chair the longest wins!"

He scratched a match on the table and seemed about to apply it to the fuse.

The gamblers almost fell over each other in their haste to get away from the table, and Silver Sol pushed back his chair, his eyes half starting from their sockets.

"You are a devil or a lunatic. Do you call that fightin' with fair weepins?"

Ily Hiram bowed himself with laughter.

Silver Sol stared at the bomb, and the color slowly came back to his face.

"I'll bet you fifty dollars it's a grand bluff!"

Ily Hiram put down fifty dollars on the table, and drew out another match.

"I'll go ye fifty!"

But Silver Sol's courage was not of a lasting kind.

"I'll tell you what," he said. "I'll bet you the fifty and fight you afterward. Let somebody carry that out in the commons and explode it there."

The gamblers, seeing that the queer thing was not to be touched off instantly, were coming back, and now they began to applaud this proposition.

"It's my choice of weapons, an' I say here and now, with this bomb!"

But Silver Sol had not the grit, and, finally, as a compromise, the Texan Detective himself carried the bomb beyond the borders of the town, where he placed it on the ground and put a match to the fuse.

Silver Sol and a number of others accompanied him, and, as the fuse began to sputter, all retired precipitately to a safe distance.

Hardly had they done so when the bomb exploded with terrific force, shaking the houses in the town and arousing the people and rending open the earth at the point of explosion.

Not a vestige of doubt was left in the minds of Silver Sol and his pards after this exhibition, that Ily Hiram was as crazy as a loon and as dangerous as a powder factory.

CHAPTER XXI.

WITH THE SPORT FROM SPOKANE.

The Sport from Spokane was not idle. In truth, he had never been busier than since his release from the Maverick City jail. Consultations were had with Judge Gale, and the sport's time was almost constantly occupied in shadowing some member of the Lone Star band.

He could not understand why Diana Temple had quit the Maverick "Brand," and Judge Gale did not give him any satisfaction on the subject.

He observed, however, that Diana did not cease her visits to Gladys Gale, and that these visits were, if anything, more frequent. Quite a friendship had apparently sprung up between these two young women.

The sport's infatuation for Gladys Gale increased with time, so that he sought every opportunity to call on her, even though he had not been able to explain the mysterious way in which he had been drugged at that supper. That she had been drugged at the same time assured him she was not the guilty party.

No small part of his work was the task of trying to shield Judge Gale from murderous enemies, and this, combined with a desire to see Gladys, drew him toward Gale's residence on the same night that Ily Hiram was playing that game with Silver Sol.

As he neared the house the sport became aware that some one, whom he believed to be the Weasel, was creeping across the yard.

Though the hour was late, Judge Gale was sitting on his back piazza, indulging in a cigar and ruminating on the fight in which he was engaged with the Lone Stars.

The Sport from Spokane slipped softly on a few yards farther, and ensconced

himself beneath a tree, which gave him a good view of the rear of the building.

He was sure now that the form stealing across the yard was the Weasel, and that his intentions were of a deadly character. The Weasel writhed forward like a snake, and, as he hatched along, a knife, that he held in his right hand, now and then gave forth a suggestive gleam.

The sport softly drew out a pistol, with the intention of shouting to Judge Gale and at the same time firing at the would-be assassin.

Then the earth shook with the jar of the exploding bomb which Ily Hiram had touched off.

The very windows in the house seemed to rattle, and a man dropped heavily out of the tree, landing almost squarely on the sport's shoulders, thus hurling him to the ground.

This man also held a revolver, and at the moment of the explosion it had been turned at the sport's head, so that in all probability, Ily Hiram's bomb had saved the life of the sport.

The sport was given no opportunity to learn what fate had befallen Judge Gale, being compelled to fight with fierce energy for his life.

The man who had dropped out of the tree was Mesquite Mat, who had slipped into the grounds with Weasel William.

The fall was as unexpected to him as to the sport. The loud report and the jar of the bomb had so startled and disconcerted him that he had lost his hold.

Both lost their revolvers by the collision, and rolled on the ground together in a struggle that was more desperate because it was hand-to-hand and weaponless.

The Weasel flattened himself, with a cry of fear that drew the attention of Judge Gale and caused him to leap in that direction, even though startled by the explosion of the bomb.

Seeing that he was detected and could hope to accomplish nothing except to keep his identity concealed, the Weasel darted across the yard.

It was his intention to join Mesquite Mat beneath the tree, and in his haste he fell sprawling across the men struggling together on the ground.

It was probably a fortunate fall for Mat.

The sport, thinking himself attacked by a second person, writhed out of Mesquite Mat's grasp, and Mat, springing to his feet, joined Weasel William in his further flight.

Judge Gale arrived, panting, beneath the tree, in time to see the sport scramble to his feet and the dim forms of Mesquite Mat and Weasel William climbing lightly over the fence into the street.

It all ended in less time than it takes to tell it, and Judge Gale and the sport were in possession of the grounds, while their murderous-minded enemies were flying down a dark alley to some point that offered them safety.

A few words were needed to bring the sport and the judge to a clear understanding of what had occurred.

Then they went on into the house, where they found Gladys and Miss Temple much startled by the report of the bomb and by the inexplicable sounds that had come from the rear of the building.

CHAPTER XXII.

HY HIRAM PROGNOSTICATES.

Ily Hiram and the sport had much to talk about that night, when they were alone together in their own room, and much of it was of such an interesting character that they did not soon go to bed, though the time was verging on morning.

An incident, occurring shortly after they entered their room, no doubt tended to add to their wakefulness.

Ily Hiram was about to remove his shoes, when he stopped short, stared toward the door, and, fishing a tiny bomb out of his pocket, hurled it against the door.

The bomb was really but a harmless torpedo, but it made a report, and as it crashed against the panels, some one in the corridor ran wildly for the outer air.

Hy Hiram laughed softly, and, removing his shoe, set it on the floor.

"That was the Weasel, but I fancy he'll not come back in a hurry. He's heard all about that other bomb business. I'll warrant you, from some of the fellows that saw it, and he thinks I am crazy enough to blow up this hotel, if the fool notion should strike me!

"I get lots of fun out of that fellow! I've scared him into duck fits more than once. He's trying to shadder us all the time. Do you know, he'd be a real genius in that line if he had a little more grit. He's sneakin' and conscienceless, and them two things gives him whatever ability he's got."

"But, how'd you know he was there? I didn't hear anything."

"Ner I. Do you see that little bar of light? It was blotted out jist before I threw that torpedo. I knowed that a servant didn't come between the light and the wall, because a servant would have gone on, and the light would have shone out again."

"When it didn't show again I knew that some one was standing in the corridor listening, and I've been here now long enough to know that the Weasel is the man most likely to do a thing of that kind. I was sure it was him, when he ran, for I've learned to know his steps!"

These close powers of observation were what had given the Texan Detective his reputation.

"These bombs bring me lots of amusement, too! Why, do you know people actually steer around me on the street as carefully as if I was a peddler loaded down with eggs? I've had them go out in the middle of the street to git away from me, and, this morning, one man walked a square to avoid passing me!"

"What do you think of the attempt to kill the judge to-night?"

"No more'n what I've expected. Likely it'll be repeated. You see, the election is almost at hand, and these chaps are desperate. We must look out for assassination, too. They'll either try to kill us, or they'll arrest all of us and try to get us out of the county before election day. That's my guess."

"Nobody told me, but I am sure Diana Temple brought influence to bear on Mesquite Mat to get us out of jail and save us from the mob. She may not be able to do it a second time."

"That woman puzzles me!" said the sport.

"She's the boss puzzler in this whole business!" Hy Hiram assented. "I've got some suspicions about her that I'm not jist ready to spit out yit, but I'll say to you that I'm watchin' her!"

"Do you really know which side she's working for?"

The Texan Detective looked up with one of his amused smiles.

"Well, I'm bankin' on it that she's workin' fer us. If she ain't, then I'm away out in my reckonin'!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

A MYSTERIOUS AFFAIR.

They sat talking until the morning was far advanced, for the excitements of the night had driven from them all desire for sleep.

They were still sitting thus, and were debating whether they should go to bed or go to breakfast, when they heard a commotion below, followed by a quick step in the corridor, and a woman's voice asking the way to their room.

It was the excited voice of Gladys Gale.

The Sport from Spokane quickly opened the door, and was perplexed and distressed by what he saw in the girl's face. It told a story of excitement, fright and bewilderment.

She rushed into the room, talking half incoherently.

"The doctor is at the house—and, oh, dear, I don't know what to do! I sent for the doctor; and father has been poisoned, and I'm afraid he's dying! And—and—it was in the coffee, just as it was before!"

"I thought I ought to come for you,

for you'd want to see him; and, of course, you'll want to look into the thing and—"

She was fairly wringing her hands.

Her broken story was startling. Judge Gale poisoned and dying—and poison administered in the coffee!

They left the hotel immediately, with her, and almost ran on their way to the Gale residence.

They were stared at, and the town was thrown into excitement as the story spread.

But not for an instant did the Texan Detective lose his head.

Realizing that this was especially a time for coolness and close observation, he watched everything and every one, and closely observed the appearance of the house and the grounds as they drew near.

They found Judge Gale apparently in a dying condition. A physician and a couple of servants were in the room, one of the latter being Nancy Stackpole. The physician and the servants were working energetically to bring the seemingly dead man back to life.

The physician kept administering antidotes, and finally these began to take effect.

At the first opportunity Hy Hiram left the room and made a careful survey of the earth near the doors and beneath the windows.

He seemed satisfied with his search, and, going back into the house, inquired for Nancy Stackpole.

Calling her aside, he asked her some questions.

The Texan Detective's first thought had been that the Weasel was responsible for the crime.

"Did Judge Gale go to his room and go to bed, after we went away?" he asked.

"He went to his room, and I suppose he went to bed."

There appeared no desire to evade a direct reply.

"Did any body else come to the house—after we went away, I mean?"

"No one."

"You are sure of that?"

"Not unless somebody slipped in."

"You didn't see Weasel William around?"

"No."

"And Judge Gale came down to his breakfast all right?"

"Yes."

"And was taken sick soon after breakfast?"

"Yes."

"Who serves the coffee?"

"Miss Gladys."

"But you cooked the breakfast?"

"I did."

"Did Miss Gladys eat breakfast with her father?"

"Yes."

"Did she drink of the coffee?"

"Yes."

"I want some of that coffee!"

She led the way into the dining room, and on into the kitchen.

Judge Gale's coffee cup was still on the table. It was empty, though it still held some of the dregs.

"The doctor took the coffee that was left in that cup," Nancy Stackpole explained. "He says it is poisoned."

The detective poured some water in the cup, shook it around and turned the contents into a small bottle which Nancy Stackpole brought him.

Then another bottle was brought, which he filled from the coffee urn, and he tucked the two bottles into his pockets.

He asked some further questions of the woman, and extended his inquiries to the other servant, and to Gladys, and even to the doctor.

He carefully treasured all he heard and saw; and then, learning that Judge Gale was rapidly improving, he left the house and hurried back to the hotel.

At the first opportunity the Sport from Spokane engaged Gladys in conversation.

She was still on the borderland of hysteria. That she was grieved and distressed beyond measure few could doubt, least of all this man who no longer tried

to hide from himself the fact that he loved her.

He could not drive from his thoughts the queer manner in which she had acted that evening when he had taken supper with her in this house, and both had been drugged, and he tried to observe her closely now, with that in mind.

When the interview closed, he was certain that all were the victims of some conspiracy at present beyond his knowledge, and he leaped to the conclusion that Nancy Stackpole was the guilty party.

So reasonable was this supposition that he wondered it had not occurred to him before.

Thinking the poison must have been purchased by Nancy Stackpole at some of the drug stores, he visited these stores on his way to the hotel.

He did not mention names, but said it was believed that Judge Gale had been poisoned by accident or design, and he wanted to see who in the town had recently been purchasing poisons.

He expected to find the name of Nancy Stackpole.

Instead, he found the name of Gladys Gale.

At one of the drug stores Gladys Gale had, a few days before, purchased some of the poison ordinarily known as "sugar of lead," giving as a reason that her eyes were troubling her and she wanted to use it in a preparation of eye-water.

It was not the kind of a poison one would think an intending murderer would purchase, but no other purchase of poison could be found that, by any course of reasoning, could be made to point in the direction of this unfortunate affair.

The information gained distressed him. He knew Gladys had not bought the poison for any other cause than the one she assigned, though he was uneasily aware of the fact that he did not know her eyes were troubling her, and she had never acquainted him with anything of the kind.

Very naturally, however, she might not think to mention the subject to him.

He almost wished he had not felt called to investigate the matter.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS.

When the Sport from Spokane returned to the room in the hotel, he found the Texan Detective busily engaged in testing the samples of coffee he had brought from the house.

He had the samples now arranged and labelled, and the labels showed that the watery fluid obtained from Judge Gale's coffee cup contained a minute quantity of sugar of lead.

He pointed to it as the sport sank into a chair.

"It must have been used because it was in the house and handy, for there are other poisons more certain and deadly that might have been procured. There are poisons that slay almost instantly."

No smile shone in his face, and the puppy dog was stilled.

"What do you make of it?" the sport questioned.

"Some one in that house committed the crime; and—I believe—it—was—Gladys—herself!"

The Sport from Spokane stared in unbelief.

"I must say I think you're away off!"

"Of course I expect you to think so."

"Why?"

A semblance of the old smile came back.

"Pardner, I ain't blind; and I have observed that you've been thinkin' and dreamin' about that girl a good deal lately."

The sport flushed uneasily.

"I'm not blaming you, and I don't blame you for insisting that she's innocent just as long as it's possible for you to do it."

"But as fer me! Well, Cupid hain't throwed any of his lose-dust into my eyes yit, and as a consequence, I think I kin see things that you fail or refuse to see."

It was said in a way that could not give offense.

"Tell me just what you have figured out," the sport requested.

"Well, we saw Judge Gale go into the house at one o'clock.

"It rained at two o'clock. No foot-steps other than them that went in the front way this morning could be found.

"That was one of the first things I done! The rain had washed out our foot-steps and Gale's and those other fellows. The freshness of the ones leading in and out of the house showed that they must have been made after daybreak. Nobody had entered by a window."

"I follow you. Go on."

"If nobody came to the house, then some one in the house done that work.

"The coffee was poisoned in the cup, not in the urn. That, with the poison in it there, was taken from the judge's cup. That other, got out of the coffee urn, shows no poison. Therefore, it's as clear as that two and two make four that the poison was put into the cup at the table!

"Nancy Stackpole and Gladys both say that Gladys served the coffee at the table. Nancy Stackpole was not in the room. She brought the things to the table and then went back into the kitchen."

"But could she not have put the poison into the cup before Gladys came to break-fast?"

"She could, if she had known what cup he was to use. But the judge does not use any particular cup, as I took pains to find out. Of the two cups brought on the table, how could the woman know which was to be given to the judge?"

The sport was silent. He could not combat this proof, but he would not accept it.

"The doctor said the symptoms were those of lead poisoning. He no doubt took the coffee in the cup home, for he had got it out of the cup. My independent investigation shows, also, lead poisoning!"

He looked his friend squarely in the face.

"Now, you may tell me what you discovered at the drug stores."

The sport started.

"I haven't said that I've been to any drug store."

"But I know you have. A man of your sense would think of going there about the first thing, and I saw from your face when you walked in that you had made a most unpleasant discovery. Did Gladys Gale buy sugar of lead from one of the drug stores?"

"She did."

"I knew it, before you said so. Now, what's the motive?"

"You're mistaken in thinking her guilty, no matter what your facts point to. I'm as sure of that as I am of the sunshine. She got that sugar of lead to use in a wash for her eyes."

The detective smiled, incredulously.

"It may be that her mind is unhinged," Hy Hiram suggested. "That would be a reason, for crazy people are liable to do almost anything. But I must say that I have never seen anything crazy in her talk or actions, and I have had my share of experience with crazy people."

"I think you will find, when you know the truth, that the poisoning was done by Nancy Stackpole," the sport persisted. "Why, look here, now! Did Gladys put that drug in the cup that sent her and me to sleep?"

"That does look a little bit crazy, sure! I may be she has crazy spells!"

"I tell you it was Nancy Stackpole."

"And Nancy Stackpole's reason?"

"In the pay of Mesquite Mat! You know they have tried a dozen ways to get rid of Judge Gale!"

"I've thought all along that Weasel William drugged that first lot of coffee, but mebbe he didn't. I'm sure of only one thing. He didn't drug this lot. Whatever may be thought of that first time, the proofs I've gathered show that the girl is the poisoner in this case."

Nor would he be persuaded to abandon this deduction.

CHAPTER XXV.

A TALK WITH DIANA TEMPLE.

Hardly had this unsatisfactory conversation ended when the Sport from Spokane was summoned again to the residence of Judge Gale.

This time the message came from the judge, who had regained consciousness and was on the road to quick recovery.

It gave the sport much pleasure to know the judge was out of danger. If by any chance it should develop that Gladys was subject to temporary mental aberration and had committed this crime while thus irresponsible, it would be an inestimable joy and pleasure to know that the attempt had signally miscarried.

He found the doctor gone and the judge awaiting him, with Nancy Stackpole in the room.

The judge, who was lying in bed, sent the servant out and beckoned the sport to a seat.

"I'm worried to death about that editorial work since Diana Temple quit the 'Brand.' You see, I'm not able to write. That paper has got to come out this evening, as hot as fire and as stinging as aquafortis. There mustn't be any failure in that, since that opposition paper has started."

Two days before, a campaign sheet, known as the Maverick "Trail," had made its appearance, in the interest of the candidacy of Mesquite Mat and his associates.

"I know you can write, for that little article you handled me the other day was as good as anything of Miss Temple's. You must take charge of the paper until I get on my feet. The doctor says I can go out to-morrow, but that won't do for to-day!"

His eagerness was so feverish the sport could not deny the request.

"What did the doctor say about your case?" the sport ventured to question.

"Poison! Sugar of lead!"

"Was it an accident?"

"Not a bit of it! It was done at the order of Mesquite Mat, though of course we don't know just how they worked it. Whoever did it drugged those cups before, and your detective friend declared that to be the work of Weasel William. The Weasel tried to knife me last night, you know, and it's likely that when he failed in that he crept back to the house and in some way worked the coffee trick!"

The theory was plausible, and the sport would gladly have accepted it, but for the statement of Hy Hiram. Hy Hiram had asserted that no one had entered the house that night after the rain.

He started, and his face changed so that the judge observed it.

The thought had come to him that possibly the Weasel had entered the house and done the work before the rain; but this was immediately swept away by the recollection that Hy Hiram had clearly shown how impossible it was for any one to know in advance what cup the judge would use.

"What caused Miss Temple to leave the 'Brand,' if I may ask?"

"You may ask, but I'm not at liberty to tell."

"Then you know?"

"She acquainted me with her reasons for leaving—yes!"

"It's too bad she couldn't have remained until after the election!"

"Oh, we'll get along all right if you'll only take the work to-day. I'm pretty well acquainted with editorial work, and think I know what suits the people here. They want the 'Brand' to hit straight out from the shoulder and hit hard! Even the opposition expects that!"

With these instructions the Sport from Spokane went to the "Brand" office.

To his astonishment he found Miss Diana Temple seated in the editorial chair writing away as if her life depended on it.

He stopped questioning, hat in hand. "I'm just back for a few hours! Hearing how the judge is, I thought I couldn't do less by him than to help get out to-day's paper, even if I had resigned the place!"

"Of course, when I stepped down from the editorial tripod I thought it was for good and all, but circumstances alter cases!"

This was an agreeable surprise and lifted a weight from the sport's shoulders. He had felt that he would not be equal to the emergency of getting out the paper in a manner to suit the judge and his constituents.

The sport knew that Miss Diana Temple had been at the residence of Judge Gale that morning, and he asked:

"You didn't tell the judge you were going to do this?"

"Oh, no. He wasn't in a condition to talk when I was there, though he was getting better. The doctor said he was out of danger. I was frightened nearly to death when I heard how he had been poisoned. A very singular thing, don't you think? I've just been writing an account of it."

"Ah! And what did you say?"

Miss Temple glanced over the sheets she had written.

"Well, you might know. I have said that there isn't any doubt in the world that it was done at the instigation of his political enemies with the hope of putting him out of the way before the day of the election, as they know they cannot defeat him if he lives. And, as a proof of the truth of the assertion, I have recalled the manner in which he was attacked and carried away and held a prisoner by men who are known to be in the pay of his opponents."

"Putting it rather bold."

"It's the only way to fight these scoundrels, sir. We must fight the devil with fire. They'll not murder me, because I'm a woman, no matter what I say, and because—"

She tapped the table with her pencil.

"That was one of the recommendations when I was employed—that I was a woman, and would be safe from a murderous attack, no matter if I did pour vitriol on the heads of our foes."

"You were about to make a further observation?"

She turned her chair about and looked him almost directly in the face.

"I was going to say they wouldn't murder me because I am going to marry their leader, Mesquite Mat. He has plenty of money, you know, and—I want money!"

"A little singular, then, that I should come down and take charge of the paper to-day?"

"Of course you don't just understand! Let me make it plain to you."

"I came here and took this position in response to an 'ad.' in the Galveston 'Gulf Breeze.' I had a position in Galveston, but took this because the pay offered was so much better."

"After I'd run the 'Brand' a little while I became acquainted with Mr. Mat Moriarty, who, as you know, is quite well to do, if he does indulge in the little eccentricity of gambling."

"He offered to marry me; and I accepted his money, with him thrown in. I have told him so, so that he is not a bit deceived in the matter. You see, I am charmingly frank! This charming frankness and a love of money are my two most distinguishing traits."

The sport did not know whether to despise or admire this woman, who was so coquettishly and fetchingly ingenuous, and who looked so handsome in her jaunty street costume.

"But I couldn't forget that Judge Gale had been kind to me, and when I learned of his misfortune this morning, I said to myself, that I'd run out the paper to-day, if the true love existing between myself and Mesquite Mat was severed forever by the act."

"He'll not like it, of course?"

"You mean he doesn't like it. He knows about it, for I told him. He swore a little when I told him, and got as mad as he dared to, but, when I sweetly assured him that I didn't belong to him yet, and that if he didn't conduct himself with proper decorum I'd never belong to him, he cooled down a bit."

"You see, I've been independent and made my own way in the world so long

that I don't let any man tell me what I shall do or what I shall not do."

Saying which, she pulled out of her hair the pencil she had stuck in her Psyche knot, viciously jabbed it against the paper and began to write.

She stopped in the middle of a sentence and wheeled her chair around.

"Oh, I say! You came down to help me, of course? You rustle around a little and scrape up some local news for me. What do you say? Interview Mesquite Mat on the poisoning scrape. Make him say something, it don't matter much what, and I'll put it in the 'Brand.' That'll be just the caper! If you can get a quarter of a column of interview out of him on the subject, I'll insert it in a prominent place, and then I'll go for him red hot on the editorial page. Yes, we must have that interview!"

Thus commissioned, the Sport from Spokane sharpened his pencil and hastened to the Maverick Corral, where he found Mesquite Mat standing in front of the bar with some cronies.

The sport advanced smilingly, and introduced himself as a reporter for the 'Brand, on that day, because of the illness of Judge Gale, and plumply asked Mat what he thought of the Judge's case, at the same time hauling out his notebook and pencil for the purpose of jotting down whatever Mat should say.

Mesquite Mat turned on him with a reddening face.

He had been thrown into a rage and did not immediately answer, rightly deeming he ought to choose his words.

"You want this for that paper?"

"Certainly."

"Well, you might say to your readers that we think the judge has played it mighty fine, but not quite fine enough to fool us! He is tryin' to make the town believe he has been poisoned, and that the poison was administered by some enemy—as he claims, I understand, by some one of his political enemies.

"Now, jist think of it a minute! Don't you fellers know that we've got too much sense in our heads to do a thing like that? If we should kill him just now before election, as this makes out we tried to do, wouldn't it turn the whole town against us? Why, we'd be snowed so deep that we could never git out.

"So you may say to your readers that we pronounce the whole thing a fake, designed to make political capital for the judge, but that he'll find before he gits through with it that it'll make capital the other way. The people are dead certain to sit down on that kind of trickery!"

Mesquite Mat had certainly made a good showing for the interests he represented, and the sport, as he went back to the "Brand" with this story, felt that Diana Temple would not make much by publishing it.

But she did. She gave it in full, and then proceeded to pick it to pieces, to show its inconsistencies, and to prove from Mesquite Mat's own words that he and his friends were trembling in their boots and ready for any desperate measures, knowing that they were already defeated.

And so the "Brand" came out, to the great delight of Judge Gale and his followers, and the political fight grew fiercer and hotter.

CHAPTER XXVI.

STARTLING SELF-ACCUSATION.

Hardly had the Sport from Spokane returned to his room that evening when a boy brought him a note from Gladys Gale, in which she asked to see him at the Gale residence.

The request made his heart hammer. He was beginning to realize that his growing love for this woman was rendering him unfit for the delicate work in which he was engaged.

He could not disguise from himself the fact that in matters which pertained to her he was becoming prejudiced against any theory that tended to place her in an unfavorable light. When this occurs good detective work can never be done.

Nevertheless, his strongest desire was to acquaint her with the condition of his mind, though he much feared the opportunity would not come.

He responded to the invitation without delay, and on arriving at the Gale residence, was directed to the parlor, where Gladys awaited him.

As he passed along the corridor he observed, through an open door, Judge Gale propped up in an arm-chair, delightedly reading the day's issue of the Maverick "Brand."

The judge saw him at the same moment and called him into his presence.

"My boy, let me congratulate you! The thing was never done finer, not even by Miss Temple. The paper is actually so red-hot that it can almost be read in the dark!"

"And Miss Temple prepared all the editorial and much of the other matter."

The judge almost bounced out of his chair.

"How was that?"

He scratched his head bewilderedly on hearing the explanation.

"Well, I dare say it's all right! I'm about ready to swear that anything that young woman does is all right. She's a regular Toledo 'Blade' for sharpness!"

Gladys Gale was not so satisfied and jubilant. The sport had never observed her when her manner was so strained and strange. He was utterly unable to analyze her emotions as depicted on her face.

"You mustn't think it unwomanly of me for sending for you this evening," she began, almost tremblingly. "And you mustn't think the things I shall say to you this evening unwomanly. Oh, how can I say them?"

Her manner fairly frightened him.

"I am going to beg you to leave the country and drop this political fight!"

"But, Miss Gale—"

"You must not deny my request!"

"But your father needs me, and I do not understand why—"

"You will be killed if you stay here."

She burst into hysterical tears and imploringly caught at his hands.

"You must go away at once! Go tomorrow. Don't say you won't. Oh, don't say you won't."

He was puzzled and pained.

"You must explain to me what you mean—why you say this! I am ready to face this danger, and your father needs me. I'm not a child or a coward to run from these foes in that kind of style. I beg of you to consider what you are asking of me! I am willing to do anything in reason, but—"

She threw herself on her knees at his feet.

"You will despise me, I know, but I must say it. It is because I love you that I ask this! By that love I implore you to leave me—to leave Maverick City."

In spite of the incongruity of the situation, his pulses leaped riotously. He had never expected to hear such words from her lips, much less had he expected her to take the initiative. Nevertheless, the words were as sweet music, though the request with which they ended jarred like a discord.

He put his arms about her and lifted her from the floor.

"I will do anything in the world for you, Gladys, that is in reason. Order me to do anything or go anywhere, except this."

"It is enough for me to know that you love me, for I have loved you so hopelessly. You seemed as far off as the stars. But if you say that you love me, I am willing to dedicate my life to you; but—" he caught his breath with a gasp—"do not ask me to desert your father in the face of his enemies. I do not understand how you can make such a request!"

She sank to the floor, sobbing bitterly.

"I am unworthy of you. I am unworthy of him! Of course you will hate me and never want to see me again. It was I who tried to kill my father! It was I who put that poison in his cup!"

He drew back as if a serpent had stung him.

"Gladys!"

"I knew you would hate me!"

"Why should you do such a thing?"

"Oh, I don't know! I can't tell you! I was desperate! I am desperate now!"

"You poor child!"

Again he took her in his arms.

"You are not yourself to-night! You are not responsible for what you say or what you do! I am sure of it! Not all the doctors in Christendom could make me think otherwise."

"Then you will go away?"

"No. I will stay here and see this thing to the bitter end. I cannot go away. You need me quite as much as your father does."

She again became hysterical.

"If you will go away, you may come back after the election, and then I will marry you. If you do not, I will never marry you."

"I cannot believe you are in your right mind!" was his ejaculation, "and so do not feel that I can obey you in that! I will have to bear your disapproval, now, and hope that time will make you see the matter in its proper light. I cannot leave Maverick City until the election is over and these villains and thieves have been brought to justice."

She fell, half fainting.

He lifted her to a lounge and was about to call for help, when she recovered and put out a hand.

"Do what I say, or leave me! Don't speak to my father about it! I trust you in this. Either leave me or tell me you will do what I ask. It is a matter of life and death!"

Her tones were implacable.

CHAPTER XXVII.

CONSULTING WITH HIRAM.

The Sport from Spokane was in a condition of great mental distress and despondency when he returned to the hotel.

He found Hiram there awaiting his return; and, for the first time, Hiram's puppy dog chuckles irritated him almost into a frenzy.

"I want your advice," he said. "I'm quite upset."

Then he sat down at the table and acquainted Hiram with all that had taken place at the interview.

Hiram chuckled again.

"You don't expect that to be news to me? If you'll remember I told you she was guilty. You're a sensible man, not to have promised to go away from here just because she asked you to. I didn't think ye had quite so much nerve and judgment, considerin'!"

"Considering what?"

"That you've tumbled heels over head in love with the girl."

"I'll not deny the charge. Still, I told her I couldn't do what she asked. You don't know what it cost me to say that to her, either."

"I think I do! I loved a woman myself, once; but—"

He dashed away a sudden tear.

"You can't trust all of 'em. You're jist beginnin' to find that out by experience. I've watched this young woman, and I've studied her case pretty close."

"For one thing, I've found out that she's not Judge Gale's daughter, but only a step-daughter. And I've found out that, some time ago, he made a will, giving to her half his property, the other half going to a son. In my opinion, that will is largely responsible for these attacks on his life."

"Take this case! I've come to the conclusion that she wants to put him out of the way before her financial cake becomes dough. He's been payin' court lately to a Mrs. Litchfield, and, should he marry her, it's likely there would be a change in the will and Miss Gladys would lose what she has thought hers."

The sport heard this as one stupefied.

"You remember what I told you about all the proofs pointing to her guilt? I worked on the case all day, and I hain't succeeded in shakin' one of the points!"

The sport recalled only too well the proofs deduced to show that Gladys Gale had administered poison to her father;

though these proofs were not now needed, for he had her own confession.

"But about the poison given to herself and me?"

"That was done by the Weasel, jist as I thought at first. It was opium, and I have been told he uses opium. He makes no pretense of hiding it, and buys the stuff openly."

"I shall not try to say that Gladys did not poison her father—she confessed it to me. But there's one thing I do know! She had not control of her own actions at the time! She was insane!"

"And she's still insane?"

It cost the sport a pang to say so, for it was an acknowledgment that in saying she loved him she was not in control of her mental faculties, and her statement might have been wholly foundationless.

"Could Diana Temple have had any hand in it?" he asked.

"I've thought of that, and it's barely possible, though I don't see how she could have given the poison. She's a puzzle to me, I must say. Half the time I think she's with us, and half the time I think she's helping the other fellers!"

"I've seen her often at the house, talking with Gladys, and I've noticed that, after these interviews, Gladys is frequently very much excited. Could it be that she has some knowledge that she holds as a club over Gladys' head?"

The sport's suggestion was new, and was worthy of attention. It appeared to explain a good many things that were tangled in mystery.

"I think I'll have to watch that Miss Diana a little bit closer!" the Texan Detective avowed. "I believe it'll pay."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

WEASEL WILLIAM MAKES A DISCOVERY.

Weasel William was of the same mind as the Texan Detective. He had also got it into his ferrety brain that there was something mysterious in the actions of Miss Diana Temple, and had set himself to shadow her movements.

In pursuance of this, he had ensconced himself under an awning across the street opposite the office of the Maverick "Brand," and had kept the office under close surveillance all the afternoon and evening.

The time was now about nine o'clock at night; the office had been deserted by the last compositor; and the Weasel was thinking of taking himself away, when he observed Miss Diana Temple swing jauntily down the street, unlock the office door, and enter.

The Weasel brightened immediately.

He had lost sight of Miss Temple some time before, and had been in a self-accusing mood because of it.

"I'll freeze to her now, you bet!"

He shifted his position slightly so that he could observe the front and rear entrances of the office, and then remained quiet.

Ten minutes later he saw a slightly-built young man step out of the office and pass up the street. This was very puzzling, for the young man locked the office door and dropped the key into a pocket.

"Hanged if he hain't locked Miss Diana up in that print shop!"

Then the Weasel smote his thigh until it resounded.

A brilliant and original idea had come to illuminate his mind.

Observing closely the direction the young man had taken, he ran lightly across the street and peered into the office. No light burned in it and everything was quiet and deserted.

"That was Miss Diana herself!"

Feeling sure on this point, he tripped up the street after the slightly-built young man whom he believed to be Miss Diana Temple in disguise, and, getting near enough for his purpose, he swung along leisurely, with his hands in his pockets, apparently looking at everything except at the object of his pursuit.

His surprise was not increased—nothing could have increased it—when he saw the young man turn toward the Maverick Corral.

When the young man entered the gaming-house, Weasel William was not ten feet behind him, and got a look into his face as he stood revealed in the brilliantly-lighted entry.

The Weasel slapped his thigh again and almost chuckled aloud. He did not doubt that this was Diana Temple, though there was a great alteration, of course, made by the change of clothing.

The young man in the doorway was a handsome young fellow, with a boyish, beardless face and complexion and eyes remarkably like Diana's.

The suspected young man passed through the first room into the big gaming establishment beyond, and the Weasel lounged after him in a tremor of ill-concealed excitement.

The young man moved through the gaming apartments as if looking for some one, and came out apparently without having accomplished the purpose of his quest.

The Weasel hung at his heels, as he walked away from the Maverick Corral, with interest and excitement constantly increasing.

William was dead sure he had struck a lead that would develop into something, but his excitement decreased his caution, and the first thing he knew he ran into the arms of the young man, who was waiting for him behind a convenient mesquite bush.

The Weasel, uttering a cry of fear, began to struggle to release himself, but his captor caught him by the collar and struck him two heavy blows in the face. Then the desperate William succeeded in tearing himself away, and bounded from the vicinity as fast as his legs would carry him.

"Perhaps he'll learn a lesson!"

The young man again moved on, satisfied that he would not again be troubled.

And the discomfited William did not try to pick up the trail which had proved so perilous, and when he had stopped the flow of blood from his battered nose, and had recovered his composure somewhat, he bore away again toward the Maverick Corral, which he entered by a rear door.

He did not go into the gaming room, but into a small room back of it, where he found a number of men congregated.

All were Lone Stars, and Mesquite Mat was one of the number.

They looked wonderingly at their spy, whose clothes were bloody and whose nose was swollen.

"Somebody been playin' with ye'r smeller?" Silver Sol asked with a coarse laugh.

"He's been jammin' his proboskis into other people's business so much that he's wrenched it out o' j'int!"

Weasel William did not take these jokes good-naturedly.

"That love tap was give to me by a—a—woman."

The Lone Stars howled, and the Weasel, seeing he had given them good cause, flushed like a sunset.

"I didn't mean it jist in that way! I think it was a woman!"

"Hear, hear! Don't know a woman when he sees one!"

"Will you stop that there, pards? I reckon I know Miss Diana Temple when I see her. An' I seen her to-night, in men's clothes!"

A stare went around the room. All eyes turned to Mesquite Mat, who smiled, but said nothing.

"I'm dead shore I'm right. I seen her go into the office of the 'Brand,' and when she come out she had on men's togs. I follered her to and from the Corral, and I run ag'inst her fist in the dark; and that's what's the matter with my nose. Now, laugh!"

Only a few of them were ready to believe him. One of these was Mat.

"Pards," he now explained, seeing that all eyes were turned to him. "I know who that young man is that the Weasel's been follerin'! That young man wants to jine this here club!"

"Is he true? Kin he be depended on?"

"Would I offer him fer membership if

he wasn't true? You know me too well fer that!"

It was now the Weasel's time to stare.

Mesquite closely studied his pals and read an assent in their faces. They were ready to indorse whatever he indorsed.

He left the room, with a gratified smile, went to another room, that was not far away, and from this room conducted the young man whom the Weasel had been shadowing.

Bringing this young man into the apartment where stood the circle of Lone Stars, Mesquite Mat led him forward.

"Pards, allow me to introduce Mr. Walter Harney, who is a special and good friend o' mine, and who you can tie to."

Absolute silence reigned and every one scrutinized the face of Mr. Walter Harney, many of them with knowing smiles.

"I don't know as I need to say to you, after you've had a good look, that Weasel William was on the right trail, a while ago; and that this young man, who calls hisself Walter Harney, hain't Walter at all, but is Miss Diana Temple, who is soon a goin' to become my wife."

Though they had been expecting this announcement, some of the Lone Stars were still bewildered and uneasy in their minds.

Miss Diana Temple took off her hat slowly and removed a wig carefully, that fitted closely, like a skull cap, and let her hair fall down on her shoulders.

Mesquite Mat regarded her with great pride.

"Pard, she's a hummer—as smart as they make 'em—and when this little fight's over she's goin' to become Mrs. Moriarty! You kin trust her jist as much as you kin trust me! It ain't too late fer you to back out yit, if you don't want her to become one of us!"

The Weasel's wonder was open-mouthed. According to his present notion, she had gone there that night for the sole purpose of joining the band.

He tried to coax a smile to his face; then got up and ambled amiably across the room, with extended hand.

"We needn't be enemies jist because we come into collision a while ago, I reckon. Leastways, I'm willin'—"

Diana's silvery laugh filled the room.

"I just thought I'd teach you a lesson. It isn't polite to follow a woman that way!"

"I thought you was up to some dirt, and that I ought to watch you!"

He shook the hand which she outstretched, and then ambled back to his former position, not in a good humor for all his words, for his nose still pained him.

There was some further talk, and then Diana Temple took the vows of the Lone Stars, under the name of Walter Harney, and was greeted by them as member of the band.

CHAPTER XXIX.

GLADYS GALE IN A STRANGE ROLE.

Gladys Gale's singular revelation made the Sport from Spokane as restless and sleepless as an owl. He walked the streets, his mind in a feverish tumult, until a very late hour.

The result was an adventure and a revelation that was as startling as anything that had yet come to him.

He was passing the court house when he beheld a suspicious light.

He had watched the court house a great deal, knowing what Mesquite Mat and the other county officers were doing.

Seeing this light, he crept close up to the building, and, finding the corridor door open, he softly entered.

He could see nothing from the outside of the house but the occasional gleam of the light; but, when he had gone to the end of the corridor, a partially-opened door gave him a view of what was occurring in one of the rooms.

He stood still, as if petrified.

A number of the county records were piled into a heap near one of the walls, and over them a quantity of kerosene was being poured. A low-turned lamp stood on the floor.

Then a match was ignited and applied to the heap of books.

The sport was almost ready to fall to the floor with horror, for the person who had struck the match and applied it was Gladys Gale.

Instantly the room was in flames.

This was one of the things he had long feared—the destruction of the records in which were the transactions of the commissioners and other county officers, for by their destruction the swindles that had been perpetrated might be so covered up that the truth would be hard to get at.

But he had never thought that Gladys Gale would be the one to attempt this destruction.

Recovering himself with difficulty, he uttered a loud cry and rushed into the room.

Gladys turned to hurry out at the same time, and ran smack into his arms.

"My God! what have you done?"

She uttered a shriek.

"Let me go!" she then screamed, and began to scratch like a wildcat. "Let me go! Let me go!"

He released her, and she darted by him into the corridor.

The fire was roaring like a furnace, and he felt it to be his first duty to rescue the books. Hence he leaped on into the room, and, at great personal risk, separated and scattered the volumes, tossing them in every direction, and then began to beat out the flames with his coat, which he took off for the purpose.

It was hot and exciting work, but, after some seconds, he succeeded in subduing the fire, and had the satisfaction of knowing that the books were not much injured.

Having stamped out the fire, he rushed out of the room, intending to follow Gladys and learn what had become of her.

He found himself confronted by officers who stopped him and put him under arrest.

"Let me go!" he urged, using the words Gladys had used to him. "Let me go!"

"Well, I reckon not! We ain't in so big a hurry as you are!"

"But I must go! I must see what has become of her!"

He tried to push by, but was drawn back with a jerk and threat.

Then he saw other men swarming into the corridor, coming from both directions. They were excited, and had been running.

The Sport from Spokane began to realize that he was on the verge of trouble, for these men came toward him with no kindly expression.

They had seen the fire through the windows, and, coming on the court house suddenly, and finding him there, they had leaped to the conclusion that he was a firebug; and, because of this belief, they arrayed themselves against him.

He ceased his efforts to escape, seeing how useless such efforts were; then he stood facing them, trying to collect his thoughts and determine what to do.

"You're mistaken, my friends, if you think I started the fire in that room. I discovered it, and had been putting it out. I saw—"

"Saw what?"

He was about to mention Gladys.

"I saw that I wouldn't have time to call up help, and so I tackled the fire myself. Some one tried to burn the records, but I think I've saved them. They are scorched, but not indecipherable.

Many of the men looked as if they half believed him, but the insane cry of "Firebug!" rising, their protests, if they made any, were drowned.

"Hang him!" was cried. "Hang the bug! Git a rope, somebody!"

A cowboy, who found it impossible to squeeze into the corridor, tossed his lariat over the heads of the crowd, where it was eagerly seized.

The sport realized that he was more than half insane, and thoughts of Gladys so filled his mind that he was hardly able to appreciate his own peril. He wanted to rush away from the court house and learn what had become of her. The night's discovery was driving him wild.

"She is crazy!" he moaned. "Surely, she is crazy!"

"Crazy! You can't play no game like that on us! Of course you'll want us to think you're crazy now! Make room there, boys! Let's get him out of here!"

The crowd reluctantly fell back, making way for the men who had constituted themselves guardians of the prisoner.

The officer, who was, this time, the county sheriff, walked in front of these men, clearing a path with his revolver.

"I want you to send for Judge Gale!" the sport demanded. "Send for Judge Gale and my friend, Hy Hiram!"

Fortunately some of Gale's adherents were in the crowd, and one or two of them darted away to fulfill the request.

Before either Gale or Hy Hiram could respond, however, the sport was led down the street in the direction of the county jail.

The men who had seized the cowboy's rope clamored loudly for his immediate hanging, and there is no doubt they would have been gratified, but that the Gale men so increased in numbers as to render it impossible.

The sport looked anxiously about for the girl who had caused all this trouble.

He did not see her, but he did see Diana Temple. Diana Temple's reportorial instincts were of the keenest, and whenever anything occurred to draw a crowd together it was pretty certain she would be there, with her wits and her pencil sharpened.

Diana was not scribbling in a notebook just now, however, but was looking at the crowd in an anxious way, as if she wondered what she ought to do.

Suddenly she darted across the street, and, hurrying up to the leader of the mob, she asked him if he could tell her where she could find Mesquite Mat.

The sport did not hear the reply, but he saw her walk rapidly away and soon disappear in the darkness.

By the time the jail was reached Hy Hiram had made his appearance, and, when the sport was conducted to a cell, Hy Hiram followed, and he was finally permitted, after much badgering with the sheriff, to enter the cell and speak to the prisoner.

"Hard luck, my boy!"

The lamplight showed his face wreathed in smiles, while no lamplight was needed to make evident the presence of the puppy dog.

"I suppose I'll pull through all right! Judge Gale can get up a bond for me which these men will be bound to take, and they realize they can't prove anything against me. The whole trouble is this: To prove myself clear, without doubt, I ought to tell the name of the party who started that fire!"

"If you knew it?"

"I know it too well!"

He pulled down the head of his friend and whispered into his ear the startling information.

"Of course she's as crazy as any lunatic in an asylum!"

CHAPTER XXX.

HY HIRAM AS AN INTERVIEWER.

Hy Hiram did not leave the vicinity of the jail until he began to feel reasonably sure his friend would be safe for a time, and then he hurried to the Gale residence of the purpose of interviewing Gladys.

Although broad day had come, he was not at all sure he could get to see her until a later hour; nevertheless, he rang the bell and asked for her.

She had not retired, and consented to see him in the parlor.

She was still very much agitated, and seemed not at all herself. He looked at her keenly, and wondered if she could be insane.

Dropping into the chair she pointed out, he began to ask her questions and to tell her of what had befallen the Sport from Spokane, all the time closely studying her face.

Her interest was instantly aroused.

"Can't something be done? He is in danger, you say? Who was it he saw setting fire to the records?"

The detective's face wrinkled and the puppy dog barked.

"Well, now, I didn't think I'd have to say that! He told me it was you. That's what I come here for to ask you what made you do it!"

She started, half rose from her chair; then sank down, gasping.

"He said that I set fire to the books?"

"That's what he said, miss!"

"Oh, that is terrible! Why should he make such a charge as that?"

"He makes it because he thinks it's so. He seen ye; and when a man sees anything he generally knows it."

"But it isn't true!" she declared, breaking into tears. "I'm sure I was not near the court house last night. Why should I want to destroy those records? Surely my father is interested in having them preserved!"

Hy Hiram nodded and beamed.

"That's what I asked myself. Why should you want to do that? It is dead sure it couldn't be to your paw's interest!"

"I didn't do it! There's some terrible mistake!"

Her emotion was so great that she got up and walked about the room, sobbing and fairly wringing her hands.

Hy Hiram's belief in her guilt was shaken. Surely this was not acting.

Before he could question her further the door bell was rung violently and a man came forward to say that the mob was collecting again at the jail and that the sport was in greater danger than before.

Hy Hiram instantly left the house and hurried to the prison.

When he got there he found a mob collected, and Miss Diana Temple standing on a dry goods box making a speech.

"Boys," he heard her say, as he came up. "I am one of you! You know me, and you know you can trust me. I have left that other gang, and I have left their paper. I have nothing more to do with any of them!"

"I've gone in with you, body and soul, and I'm going to marry your leader and candidate, Matthew Moriarty. And I say to you that if you have any regard for his interest, let this man alone. It will react and ruin everything!"

"I am willing to say to you that I don't think this man is guilty. He would have no reason to want to burn the records!"

"Yes, he has!" was shouted.

She looked the speaker in the face.

"What is the reason?"

"He wanted to burn the records and make it seem that we burnt them; and then he and his friends could claim that we had burnt them to cover up certain things that we didn't want to be seen! It is the slickest kind of a game on his part."

The point was so well taken that the crowd howled in agreement.

"But I say he is not guilty. Why, he put out the fire before any one else got in there! Would he have done that if he had wanted to burn the records? Why should he start the fire and then put it out before any damage was done? You see, the thing won't hold water."

She continued in this strain, and again swayed the mob to her will.

She had sent for Mesquite Mat, and now that worthy made his appearance and got up on the dry goods box beside her.

"She is just all right, pard; and whatever she says goes! I don't think myself, it'd be a good idee to string this feller up! It'd jist make friends for his side."

And thus again did Diana Temple save the life of the Sport from Spokane.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE STING OF A KNIFE.

Worn out with the hard day's work, the Texan Detective went late to bed.

He was not usually a sound sleeper, but on this occasion he slept like a top.

The Sport from Spokane was still held in prison awaiting an examination, though all danger of mob violence was considered past.

Out of his dreamless sleep the Texan Detective was awakened by the sting of a knife in his side.

Looking up, he saw the knife again de-

ascending, and caught it in time to turn the blow aside.

He leaped half out of bed, holding the knife-hand of his intended slayer.

The room was not lighted by a lamp, but sufficient moonlight and starlight came in through the windows to enable him to recognize his assailant as a woman, and that woman as Gladys Gale!

Only that morning he had talked with her in her father's house. The night before she had tried to burn the records; now she had tried to kill him.

Was there method in this, or was it madness pure and simple?

His Hiram wrenched the knife out of her hand, but before he could tighten his clutch sufficiently to hold her, she jerked away and darted into the corridor.

He followed her to the top of the stairway, in his half-dressed condition, and saw her leap into the street.

Hardly a sound had been made by either.

Feeling the pain of the knife wound, he lighted the lamp and examined the cut. The blow had been aimed at his heart, but the point of the knife had struck against a rib, thus turning the point aside and inflicting only a flesh wound.

It had bled freely, so that his clothing, as well as the bed coverings, were marked with blood.

He tore some strips of cloth into bandages and sought to stanch the wound.

Not succeeding very well, he went to the head of the stairs and called for the clerk, who, when he came up, assisted him in bandaging the cut.

"I wish you'd keep quiet about this thing!" was the detective's request. "I'm pretty sure I know who done this, but I'm not ready to tell it yet. I'll pay you for the damage done the bed. You can say that I was assaulted and slightly wounded, but that the whole thing amounts to very little!"

The clerk promised compliance, and, soon afterward, the Texan Detective made his way weakly out of the house.

Day was breaking. Going round to the window that overlooked the little garden, he searched for a trail, but found none. But he found a woman's footprints near the gate, and, observing that these did not lead into the street, but back into the shrubbery, he followed them, growing more and more certain they had been made by Gladys.

The trail led into an alley, and thence into the open country beyond the limits of the town. He had expected it would lead toward Gale's residence.

"She's vamoosed the ranch, that's certain!"

He looked puzzledly out toward the Texan hills, that showed so bare and arid under the rising sun.

"Yes, she's as crazy as a loon! There can't be no doubt about that!"

However, to make sure he was not in error, he went back into the town and paid a visit to the residence of Judge Gale.

He found Gale and the servant there, but not Gladys. Gale did not know Gladys was out of the house until the detective asked to see her, and the servant, going to her room, reported it vacant.

It was an unpleasant thing to do, but His Hiram felt compelled to acquaint Judge Gale with what had taken place.

"You may not believe me, and I sha'n't blame you if you don't. But Gladys not only tried to kill me last night; she tried to burn those records the night before."

Naturally the judge was stupefied and disbelieving. He was half-inclined to be offended, but the detective stuck to his statements and backed them up with proofs.

The judge was pained and shocked and excited beyond measure.

"This thing must be investigated. You must go after her—some one must go after her! As you say, she is surely crazy! She has acted queerly in many things lately, and has puzzled me a great deal!"

It was the only solution he could accept, for, if not crazy, then it seemed she must be criminal.

The detective exhibited his wound.

"I'm purty weak yit, Judge Gale, but I

guess I kin call myself ready fer duty. I'll do everything I can fer you and fer your daughter. The whole thing is surely a mighty big muddle!"

CHAPTER XXXII. SCORCHING A SPY.

The morning after the discovery that an attempt had been made to burn the records, there was a further and, equally unpleasant discovery, and that was that, though the records had not been burned, the pages which contained the minutes of the commissioners' proceedings, and all the other pages which might have been used to prove the criminality of certain of the county officers, had been removed bodily out of the books.

Though the general public did not know how this had been done, the reader may here peep behind the curtain and ascertain.

Mesquite Mat and Diana Temple stood in that same room in the court house the night after the Sport from Spokane had been dragged away to jail.

They had screened the windows, and a member of the Lone Star band stood outside to make sure that their work was not interrupted.

It was understood by the public that the records were being guarded, but the guards were Lone Stars, and were now conveniently absent.

Mesquite Mat had lit a small hand lamp which the young woman held for him, as, with a keen-bladed knife, he carefully and neatly cut out of the records the leaves he wanted destroyed.

She took them from his hands, one at a time, and rolled them into a neat bundle.

Then the books were carefully replaced on their shelves, the light was extinguished, the screens removed from the windows, and Mesquite Mat and Diana Temple crept out of the building and away.

"I'll go straight home and burn them," she promised, as she parted from him at a street corner.

She was in her own proper attire as Diana Temple, and she hurried home along the public street, making no attempt at concealing her movements, and entered her room.

As she crossed the threshold of the house she observed a shadow flit on before her, and observed, also, that this shadow flitted through the doorway of her room.

"Ah!"

She gave a little start, then walked straight on, nervously fumbling at the roll of paper.

It was quite dark in the room, but the darkness soon fled before the lamp she lighted.

It was not a luxuriously-furnished apartment, though everything was neat. There were a bed, a dresser, a writing table, a bookcase and some chairs, with a carpet on the floor and some pictures on the walls.

In addition, there was a fireplace, which, just now, as the weather was pleasant, was hidden by a board screen, that was covered with some brightly-tinted wall-paper.

She sat down and examined the record sheets cut from the books, looking over them carefully and commenting on their contents in half-audible tones.

Then, as if something had suddenly occurred to turn her thought in another direction, she whisked out of the room, taking the roll of papers with her.

When she returned she had a box of matches in addition to the roll.

Striking one of these matches, she ignited the papers, and held them in her hands until they were briskly burning.

Then she quickly slipped aside the fire-screen and tossed the burning mass into the fire-place.

The fireplace was already more than half filled with old papers and rags and cloth clippings, and the inflammable mass caught instantly and roared up the chimney.

A strange, half-furious howl issued from the heart of the fire, and a nondescript creature leaped into view, and sprang for the center of the floor, shaking wads and waves of fire from himself.

Diana Temple fell back with a little cry,

but it was observable that she retreated toward the door and planted herself there in a way to bar the egress of this flame-clad stranger.

Seeing that the room was about to take fire from the burning paper he shook from his person, she deftly locked the door and kicked the paper back into the fireplace, where it could do no harm.

The spy who had been so cleverly routed was none other than Weasel William!

His was the shadow she had seen flit into the room, and a slight displacement of the fire screen had informed her, on entering, where he had sought refuge.

Weasel William had not been satisfied with the way Diana Temple had been permitted to join the band of Lone Stars, and had deliberately set himself to spying on her movements, in the belief that he could show her to be an enemy.

He had known what the paper roll was which she bore to the house, for he had heard Mesquite Mat talking to her about it, and had heard her promise to destroy it. It had not been his belief that she would do anything of the kind.

Now she rushed to his assistance and help to free him from the fire, though not until he was painfully burned in several places.

His paroxysmal howls gave place, to dolorous whines, and he sank into a chair, feeling that he had been trapped.

She crouched on a seat in front of him, laughing heartily.

"That is the funniest joke yet. I've been reading about Indian jugglers lately, and I've been telling myself I believed I could do their tricks, too, if I'd only try. You see, you wave a handkerchief, or something of the sort, and little bushes sprout up, with prairie chickens sitting in the limbs, or something of the kind."

"But when I shook that burning paper into the fireplace, I didn't think to conjure up a real, live man!"

"You don't know how funny you looked. Weasel, when you jumped out of there, like a fiery dragon and gave out that yell! I think I shall have to put that in the 'Brand,' even if I'm not connected with the paper any more!"

She laughed so merrily, and there seemed such an absence of venom in her disposition that the crushed Weasel ventured to take courage.

"What were you doing in there, anyway?"

He straightened up, ready for any falsehood.

"I'll jist tell ye what, Miss Temple—I come hyar a while ago lookin' fer Mesquite Mat, an', seen' nobody in. I jist thought I'd wait fer him to come, fer I nacherly thought he'd see you home."

"Then I heard somebody rushin' along the corridor, there! I was sure it wasn't you, iver I thought Mat'd be with ye! When you stopped at the door an' I seen you was comin' in, I got rattled, fer I didn't know but it was a burglar or something like that, and I hid in the fireplace—an' that's the truth!"

"You ought to go into the fiction business, Weasel. You'd make a fortune at it!"

"Hain't Mesquite Mat comin'?"

He looked uneasily toward the door.

"Not this evening. He sent me home to burn those papers, you know, and you can tell him that, in burning them, I came pretty near burning you. It will be the sort of a joke he appreciates!"

"Yes'm!" he admitted, though he crouched and cringed like a whipped spaniel.

"And now, as you've seen that they were duly burned, perhaps you'd better trot along! And I'd advise you, Weasel, to be a little more careful hereafter, how you invade a young lady's private apartment. I've known men to be shot and hanged for less offenses."

"And I'll say to you, too, just in the way of advice, that if you should ever think it would be a healthy and wise thing to sneak around and dog my steps, you'd better think about it several times before trying it! Good-night!"

"Yes'm!" said the Weasel, and then he slunk out into the night.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

MISS TEMPLE GETS HER FORTUNE TOLD.

Diana Temple had heard a rumor to the effect that it was a woman who had attempted to burn the records. The rumor did not give the name of this woman, and Diana did not dream it was Gladys. For that matter, no one save the detectives knew the name of the incendiary.

Diana leaped to the swift conclusion that this woman was Nancy Stackpole, as she had already leaped to the conclusion that it was Nancy Stackpole who did the drugging and poisoning.

Taking advantage of the fact that Nancy Stackpole was reputed to be a fortune-teller, she went to the Gale residence and into the servant's rooms.

"Of course I don't really believe in fortunes, but I just have a curiosity to know what you will make out of it!"

Diana said it in a shamefaced way.

Half the people that came to Nancy Stackpole claimed they did not believe in fortunes, and yet Nancy Stackpole always noticed that the things she told them affected them strangely. And so she had come to regard this as one of the regulation lies.

"It don't make any difference to me whether you believe it or not, just so you pay me the money. I can't say, myself, whether it's true or not. I mix up the cards, and cut 'em and count 'em out, an' tell the fortune by the way they run!"

"We'll see how it runs, then!"

It was extremely interesting, and in many respects wonderful, the fortune that Nancy Stackpole told Diana Temple! She was to marry a dark-haired young man, who was much older than herself, and who was represented by that interesting creature, the jack of clubs. Of course this could be no one else than Mesquite Mat.

And she was to flaunt silks and wear diamonds, and her pathway was to be strewn with roses and all the other flowers that are supposed to be applicable on such occasions.

"Well, I never had so many diamonds promised me for fifty cents before! And now, I'm going to tell your fortune! I don't know anything about cards, in that way, you understand, but I'm great on coffee grounds. What I can't see in the bottom of a coffee cup isn't worth seeing!"

As she said it she reached over and took a cup from the table.

"Put that down!" Nancy commanded, springing at her.

"Why, what's the matter?"

"Put it down, I say!"

There was a look of alarm and fright in Nancy's eyes.

"Why, there's nothing in it but water, is there?"

Nancy recovered herself with an effort.

"No; just water! That ain't the cup I thought you had! There's another cup here that I've got some rat poison in that I was fixin' up. The rats has been so bad they've about taken the place!"

"Well, if it's only water, I guess I'll take a drink of it. I'm a little bit thirsty. Then you may get me the coffee cup."

She lifted it to her lips, while Nancy looked steadily at her with a rigid face.

"You're sure it's water?"

"They hain't a thing in that cup but water, I tell ye!"

She almost gasped the words.

Diana Temple replaced the cup on the table, and, reaching into the folds of her dress, drew out of a hidden pocket a small gold-mounted revolver, which looked more like an ornament than a deadly weapon.

She placed the revolver by the side of the cup.

"I'm sure there's something in this cup besides water! You say there isn't. Prove it to me by drinking it!"

She pushed the cup toward Nancy, who drew back with a shiver.

"I'm not wanting a drink now!"

The little revolver came up on a level with Nancy's eyes.

"Drink that stuff, I tell you. You were perfectly willing for me to drink it, and said it was only water!"

Nancy reached out as if to take the cup, and tried to knock it from the table.

The hammer of the revolver came back with a click.

Nancy Stackpole was courageous, but she was only a woman, and at this exhibition of determination she slipped from her chair in a fainting condition.

Diana doubted at first if the faint were real, but investigation indicated it was no pretense. The woman lay on the floor, limp and senseless.

Diana replaced the revolver in her pocket, turned the contents of the cup into a bottle that she found in one of the shelves, and, having done all this with cool deliberation, she came back to where Nancy Stackpole was still lying in a faint.

Opening a door, she thrust out her head, and, seeing a man passing, ordered him to send instantly for the nearest doctor.

The doctor did not live half a block away, and came in before Nancy had recovered.

When she had regained consciousness he placed her on the floor with a pillow under her head.

Diana Temple was unwilling to leave the room, and she now asked the doctor to summon Gladys Gale, for the events of this chapter occurred before Gladys attempted the life of the Texan Detective.

Gladys came into the room, very much alarmed and excited.

Nancy Stackpole sat cowering in a chair.

"I want you to examine the stuff in this bottle and tell me if it is not poison."

He smelt of it; then tasted it.

"The rankest of poison!"

"Yet that woman was willing I should drink it, a while ago, and assured me it was only water. When I demanded that she should drink it, she refused and went into a faint!"

Then she hastily explained how she had seen Nancy Stackpole mixing the stuff in the cup, and how she believed from the first it was poison, and of the course she had pursued in an endeavor to drive Nancy into a confession of guilt.

"I believe that that is the woman who poisoned Judge Gale!"

"It is false!" Nancy screamed, putting out her hands.

"Not only do I think she poisoned Gale, but that she intended to try to poison him again!"

"It's a lie!" shrieked Nancy Stackpole.

"Come, come!" said the doctor. "The matter can't be settled in that way. What did you prepare this poison for?"

"I was preparing it to kill rats, and she knows I told her so!"

Diana Temple turned away in disgust.

"You may remain with her until she is fully recovered, doctor, or you can go now. As for me, I want to have a talk with Gladys."

She walked almost rudely from the room and requested Gladys to accompany her, a request with which Gladys shortly complied.

"Don't you think I was right in charging her with that, Gladys dear? I am sure she tried to poison Judge Gale, and that she drugged the coffee which you and that Sport from Spokane drank. What is your opinion?"

"I don't know, I'm sure!"

The nervous state of Gladys Gale had increased. She was fairly shaking.

Finding that Gladys was not able to help her, and that Judge Gale was not in the house, Diana Temple departed and went back into the streets.

When she called on Judge Gale, the next morning, she was told by him that Gladys had mysteriously left the town and he could not guess her whereabouts; that he was preparing to have the country searched and proposed to offer a large reward for information, and that he believed she had been foully dealt with.

Diana Temple did not know what to believe.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

DIANA SHOWS JEALOUSY.

Diana Temple left the presence of Judge Gilbert Gale in a most perplexed mood. He was almost wild as he talked with her, and he had accused—bitterly accused—Mesquite Mat of being at the bottom of the mystery.

Judge Gale believed that Mesquite Mat had had Gladys carried away, thinking to strike him through his affections and paralyze his energies just at a time when his every thought should be concentrated on the approaching election.

Notwithstanding this belief, Diana Temple, when she departed from the residence of Judge Gale, went straight to the Maverick Corral, and, passing through the gambling room, sought Mesquite Mat.

She found him in the little back room, which he so frequently used to consult with his pals and adherents.

He showed by his manner that he was glad to see her.

He had some buckskin bags on the table in front of him, and a lot of coin beside them.

"I've just been thinkin' of you. You see, I'm gittin' ready fer breakers. There ain't any man kin tell jist how this election business is goin' to turn out. If we win, we've the county by the heels and our fortunes are made. If we lose—"

"It's likely that somebody'll have you by the necks, eh?"

"That's jist about the size of it!"

He poured the contents of one of the bags out on the table and showed her the heap of jewels it had contained. They were diamonds and rubies, many of them flawless and perfect.

"You see, I've been gittin' ready fer a rainy day this long time. This gold don't amount to much, fer it's too heavy to carry; but that bag o' diamonds and stuff is worth fifty thousand dollars in any market in the world. These three big ones I added to the heap the last time I went down to Dallas!"

He surveyed them with much pride and he held them up to the light for her admiration.

"And they're fer you, my dear, as much as they're fer me. If matters go ag'inst us hyar, we'll jist cut sticks, you an' me, an' we'll go away off somewhere, where we're not known, and we'll set up like a king and queen. I've been figgerin' about it fer some time—in fact, ever since you told me you'd marry me!"

She expressed her admiration in little cries of delight.

"Oh, the beauties! Wouldn't a string of them about my neck just turn all the women green with envy?"

She picked up a handful and laid them against her cheek and glanced into a tiny mirror.

She had been powdering heavily, and the glass revealed a patch of it under one ear.

She grimaced and rubbed it away with a handkerchief, and put the jewels back on the table.

"I want you to take charge of 'em fer me!" he said. "My rooms air liable to be raided any night, and I owe so many debts hyar that I'm afraid to put 'em in the bank. You kin keep 'em fer me better'n any one else!"

He stopped from shoving them into the bag and looked keenly at her.

"I don't know but it's a little risky, even with the woman that promised to marry me!"

She instantly bridled.

"I don't want your jewels nor your money. I told you that I'd marry you, and that I was going to marry you for your money. But I wouldn't marry you now if you were made out of gold and a diamond was hung to every hair of your head!"

"What!" he sputtered, letting the bag fall. "What in tarnation have you got into your head, now?"

"Tell me, Mesquite Mat, what you have done with Gladys Gale!"

He stared at her in open-mouthed amazement.

"What in thunder air ye talkin' about?"

"Just this! Gladys Gale was carried away from this town last night by someone! She was at home last night, and she's not there now. Her father is fairly crazy about her and don't know where she is. Now, I feel dead sure that you know. That you had a hand in it! That you ordered it!"

He sank down into a chair in mo-

mentary forgetfulness of the jewels and coin on the table.

"Well, may I be shot if I know anything about it. And you thought I'd carried her off, and was workin' ye'rself up into a rip-roarin' fit of jealousy over it!"

His look of amazement gave way to one of amused pleasure.

"Do you know, I've been doubtin' sometimes if you keered enough fer me to lose any sleep—"

"And so you tried me by carryin' off Gladys Gale?"

"Didn't I tell ye I don't know anything about Gladys Gale?"

"Well, yes; I got jealous, that's a fact! And the thoughts I had, it seems to me, were enough to make anybody jealous. Let me tell you, Mesquite Mat, if you were married to me forty times and proved untrue to me, so help me, God, I'd put a knife in your heart!"

He drew back with a little shiver.

"Well, you kin trust me!" he declared.

"An' I don't know as I kin prove it to you in any better way than by lettin' you keep this stuff fer me. I tell you what it is! There hain't nary other man ner woman in this world that I would give it to!"

His earnestness was almost pathetic. If Diana Temple was playing a game, she was certainly playing it to perfection.

"And you don't know where that woman is?"

"Honest Injun! I hadn't even heard that she'd gone from the town! Kin you carry this?"

He had filled the bag with jewels and tied it, and now offered it to her.

She searched through her dress and, finding the mouth of the pocket, dropped into it the heavy bag.

At almost the same instant there was a movement heard near the door, and Mesquite Mat, pushing it quickly and violently open, discovered the Weasel in the passage.

He was recolling, as if he had been surprised, but now stepped boldly forward and entered the room.

"I didn't know anybody was in hyar, and so was jest goin' to take hold of the knob and walk in."

Diana Temple looked at him suspiciously.

"Do you know, Mesquite Mat, that this chap is spyin' on me all the time? When I took those record leaves home and burnt them, he slipped into my room ahead of me and hid in the fireplace; and I set him afire when I threw the burning leaves in on him."

"I did not intend to speak of this, and should not but for his continued watchin'. After the way I bested him I thought I had given him lesson enough to make him let me alone."

Mesquite Mat had grown red with rage. "What do you mean by that business?" he howled.

"She's mistaken about me follerin' her, now! I did watch her when she burnt them record leaves, because I thought you'd want me to watch her. How could you know that she would go and burn 'em?"

"How did you know that I give 'em to her?"

The Weasel writhed and reddened.

"Why, I heered you say so to her—I heered you tell her to burn 'em!"

"And you've not only been spyin' on her, but you've been spyin' on me!"

He lifted a foot as if he thought to kick the Weasel out of the room.

"It was an accident that I heered that. I wasn't spyin' on you!" the Weasel protested, leaping away from the foot.

Mesquite Mat glared at him in great wrath.

"Now, look here, Weasel William, there's jist two things that I ain't goin' to stand: You spyin' on me'er you spyin' on this young woman. If I was dead sure that you sneaked into that passage jist to hear what we was sayin', I'd choke the life out'n you."

The Weasel reiterated his assertion that he had not been spying, and took advantage of the pause to slip through the doorway and from the room.

But he shook his head and his fist, as he went on into the street, and bitterly muttered:

"I've tried to serve ye fair, Mesquite Mat! But I won't stand no sich sass es that. If ever you was needin' friends I cale'late you're needin' 'em now, and you'd better hol' on to 'em, even if one of 'em is nothin' but Weasel William!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

HELD BY THE LONE STARS.

The influence of Diana Temple was as marked in the second release from prison of the Sport from Spokane as it had been in the first release.

She made a little speech for him before the examining judge, and showed how impossible it was that he could have fired the records for the purpose of destroying them, in view of all the evidence in the case.

It was a neat little speech, and it did Diana great credit; and Mesquite Mat was prouder than ever of her, although down in his inmost heart he was half-jealous of her interest in the sport.

He was too discreet, however, to say so, or to interpose any but the mildest objections to her course of action.

He had allowed her to persuade him that it was most impolitic to bring about the death of the sport at that time, though, when alone, serious doubts of the correctness of her opinions frequently intruded to trouble him.

One of the first efforts of the sport was to pick up the trail left by Gladys Gale and follow it to the end.

He talked with the Texan Detective and obtained all the particulars of that strange attack with the knife from which the detective had so miraculously escaped with his life.

It was an inexplicable puzzle, but he did not doubt there was a rational solution, if only that solution could be found.

One of the first things was to learn what had become of Gladys.

Judge Gale had offered a reward for information leading to her discovery, but it was not that offer that stimulated the sport.

Getting the trail at the point where it left the town, he started out alone, and, following the faint indications, for he was not unskilled in trailing, he traced her far into the hills.

The marks showed her to be unaccompanied, and on foot, which deepened the mystery surrounding her movements. In his estimation, this was but another indication of her mental unsoundness.

In a hollow in the hills he came on her, apparently dying, on the hot sand.

He ran up to her, with anxious cries, and strove to arouse her to consciousness.

He could not but note her worn and tattered condition. It was as if she had run from foes until she had dropped down exhausted.

Fortunately, he was well supplied with water and stimulants, as well as food. He had come prepared for a long and thorough search.

He now applied restoratives, first dragging her into the shade of a rock.

It was tremendously hot there in the hollow, with hardly a breath of air, which was sufficient reason why she had fallen.

His rapture was great when she opened her eyes and looked him in the face. Her glance was one of recognition and pleasure. It also indicated surprise.

"Where am I?" trying to sit erect.

She seemed to view her surroundings with astonishment.

"You're a long ways from Maverick City. I've been following you for hours."

She stared at the rocks and sand and hills as if in utter bewilderment, but there was no indication of insanity in either her words or her actions.

He greeted this as an evidence that her temporary fit of aberration had passed away.

"But tell me how I came here?"

"All that I can tell you is that you walked. I know that, for I followed

your trail. You disappeared from the town, and your father is wild about it!"

He did not speak of the reward offered.

She struggled to her feet, and, stepping out from the shadow of the rock, sought to look down the valley.

Instantly she recoiled, with a cry of alarm, and he, rushing to her side, saw that they were surrounded by masked men, whose black masks bore those suggestive white stars.

He was about to draw his revolver, when the foremost covered him with a rifle and sang out to him to throw up his hands, which he did, seeing that resistance was useless.

The direction from which the Lone Stars had come made it plain that they had not followed the trail of the girl, but had arrived there by a mere chance.

One of the men leaped forward and took from the sport his weapons.

They did not question him as to his name, which they seemed to know. But, though he listened closely, he could not recognize any of them by their voices. He was pretty sure, however, that they were citizens of Maverick City and followers of Mesquite Mat.

They also knew the girl, for they called her by name, and talked in an aside of her father.

"I 'low this is a runaway scrape," the leader observed, as he directed that the sport's hands should be tied. "Likely the old judge will loom up directly, madder'n a bald hornet and armed like a cactus. And then there'll be fun. That is, if we don't git you away from here before he comes!"

Gladys Gale was too much excited and alarmed to notice these words.

She was bidden to mount a broncho, and was assisted into a vacant saddle. But the sport was forced to move on afoot.

The course of the little party was away from Maverick City and farther into the hills.

They sought the heart of the range, and halted, finally, before the mouth of a rocky cavern.

Into this cavern the sport was taken, and then Gladys Gale was separated from him and taken away.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A BULLET FROM A BOWLDER.

When the Sport from Spokane did not return to Maverick City, Hy Hiram grew so uneasy that he slipped out of the town and tried his own hand at following the trail into the hills.

It was very easy in the soft earth and sand near the town to distinguish the footprints made by Gladys and by the sport, and he got along swimmingly for several miles.

When he came to the place where Gladys had been overtaken, and she and the sport had been captured by the Lone Stars, he stopped and puzzled out the signs there written.

He could see that they had been taken away by a band of horsemen, and leaped to the natural and correct inference as to who these horsemen were.

For a while this trail led as broad and plain as a wagon road. Then it played out on the flinty hills.

Around one of these hills he carefully picked his way, and, discovering nothing, set out to return, with the intention of examining the other slope.

As he moved slowly along, studying the earth and rocks at his feet, and also warily watching for any manifestations of an enemy in front, his keen eyes lit on a boulder which he could not remember having seen in that place.

It resembled the gray rocks strewn in various places, and only the fact that he had thought that particular locality barren of rocks made him suspect the genuineness of the boulder.

Nevertheless, he walked straight toward it, scanning it narrowly, and with a hand in one of his pockets on a bomb.

As he walked, a jet of fire came from the boulder's heart, and a bullet struck him squarely in the breast.

He staggered backward, with a gasp, and seemed about to fall; then recovered his footing, and, drawing a revolver from a hip pocket, shot back at the bowlder without an instant's hesitation.

The bowlder collapsed. It had been nothing but a gray blanket; and from beneath it there rolled the body of a man.

He was one of the Lone Stars, and had been sent back to watch the trail. In changing his location, he had been caught in this open space by Hy Hiram's return, and had adopted an Indian expedient.

Hy Hiram ran forward, the Adam's apple hopping up and down in excitement and the puppy dog chirruping regretfully.

"Too bad that I killed the scamp! That's something I never like to do, but—"

He opened his shirt, and a battered bullet dropped to the ground.

Beneath his shirt there was a shirt of steel mail, which had stopped the bullet and saved his life. But the bullet had hit with sufficient force to knock him almost from his feet; and now, as he opened his shirt of mail and anxiously examined his chest, there was a bruised spot beneath the point where the bullet had struck.

"A narrow escape! But for this steel I would be the dead man an' he would be standin' over me. He certainly shot to kill!"

He squatted and inspected the face and form. He did not know the man, though he was sure he had seen him in Maverick City, and that he belonged to Mesquite Mat's crowd.

The detective was much shaken by what had occurred, and he fairly reeled, almost falling to his face, as he got on his feet.

Feeling that he had not time to bury the man, and sure the fellow's comrades would find him and attend to that, the Texan Detective again essayed to pick up the trail.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

HY HIRAM MAKES A CAPTURE.

Hy Hiram found the lost trail farther down the slope, though it was even there quite dim and followed it up for two hours longer.

Then he saw before him two men camped.

An inspection from the crest of the ridge told him they were Lone Stars, that they were journeying toward Maverick City, and that in all probability they belonged to the band he was trailing.

For the last hour he had made very slow progress, and had been in constant danger of losing the trail, and now he wondered if it might not be possible to get from these men the knowledge he sought.

How to get it was the question.

For some time he lay on the crest, studying one plan and then another, and dropping them all, when he saw one of the men pick up a gun and leave the camp, as if going in search of game.

The other continued to sit by the camp fire, with his nose now and then above the frying pan, in which he poked at some bits of bacon.

Hy Hiram crept down from the crest, and by a detour approached this man, slipping up behind him.

Hy Hiram had drawn from one of his capacious pockets a small bag, like a gunny bag, though much smaller, to which a draw-string was fitted.

This open-mouthed bag he now held in his right hand, with one of the gunpowder bombs in his left.

His steps were as noiseless as a cat's, and not until he was almost on him did the outlaw become aware of his presence.

The outlaw sprang up, with a low cry, and sought for a weapon, but before he could do more, the bag descended over his head and the string was drawn tight.

At the same instant Hy Hiram cocked a revolver and commanded the man to stand still and make no noise if he valued his life.

It was a predicament the like of which the outlaw had never seen. Not doubting he would be instantly shot if he refused to obey, he permitted Hy Hiram to tie his hands.

Hy Hiram also dropped a cord around the fellow's neck, and then drove him on before, away from the camp-fire and toward the dimmest part of the lower slopes.

When they had gone in this manner a half-mile or more, and the location of the camp-fire was shut out from view, the detective stopped his terrified captive.

"If you'll jist take this thing off'n my head," the fellow sputtered. "It's smotherin' me!"

Hy Hiram stepped in front of him and chuckled, at the same time pulling on the rope to let the man know that any foolish break for liberty would be ineffectual.

"I'll tell you what! I'll cut holes for your eyes and mouth! No, I'll take the thing off, though I won't take the cord off, if you'll jist show me the way to the hidin' place of your pards! They went this way not so very long ago, and I've figured that you know jist where they air!"

"Take it off!" the rascal panted. "Please take it off! If you don't, I'll drop down hyar in a dead faint! It's smotherin' me!"

The puppy dog chirruped uproariously, for Hy Hiram knew the man was lying. No doubt the bag was hot and close, but it would not smother anybody.

"Will you promise to take me to the hidin' place of your pards?"

"Yes, I'll promise anything!"

The detective whipped off the bag.

The man looked around, tremblingly.

Hy Hiram jerked the cord that was about the fellow's neck.

"Go on, now! Show me the hidin' place of your pards!"

The outlaw was obedient, and for more than a half-hour all went well.

Then they descended into a valley where they beheld five or six Lone Stars camped. The vicinity was very hilly, with dome-shaped and table-like bowlders rising like houses.

The two stopped. The prisoner, with a nervous thrill of hope, and the detective with a keen interest, now that he saw some of the Lone Stars before him.

Hy Hiram found very soon that he had placed himself in a position of extreme peril. Hardly had he and the prisoner got into the valley when the Lone Stars broke camp and came toward them.

As it was impossible to climb out of the valley without discovery, Hy Hiram drove his prisoner to the top of one of the table rocks. There he made him lie down, and he lay down beside him.

In spite of the peril, he peeped over the edge of the rock and saw that the Lone Stars were now very near, and coming directly toward the rock. They would pass it within a stone's throw.

"If you so much as budge, I'll put this bullet through your head!" he threatened, as he placed the revolver on the rock between them ready for use. "You may know, first as last, that I don't intend to be taken. If those fellows find me, I'll be killed, but you'll go first!"

There was such deadly threatening in the tones that the excited and trembling outlaw fairly shivered.

The clatter of the hoofs of the Lone Stars' horses now came plainly. The Lone Stars were riding at an easy trot, and would be out of the valley in fifteen or twenty minutes. If Hy Hiram could keep his prisoner ten minutes longer all would be well.

He could see that the man shook with nervousness as the hoof-beats sounded louder, and again and again he warned him to be quiet under penalty of death.

The horsemen clattered past the rock without looking up, raising a cloud of dust, and, when they were by Hy Hiram again ventured to look over the rim.

As he did so, he felt the revolver plucked from his hand.

Though the prisoner's hands were tied behind his back, he had rolled half over and snatched away the weapon.

"Crack! Crack!" came instantly.

One ball tore through Hy Hiram's hat.

Then the desperate rascal, without trying to fire again, deliberately rolled from the rock, which was fifteen feet high.

The situation was full of peril to Hy

Hiram, for the horsemen had stopped and were now coming back.

There was nothing else for him to do but to leap to the ground on the opposite side of the rock and make a desperate run for safety.

Fortunately, before the horsemen could gain the rock and understand what had occurred, he was able to interpose another rock between himself and them, and then, by terrific running and deft dodging, he gained another slope and climbed a path to a precipice which he felt he could hold against all comers.

He would have had a harder time of it, though, if the Lone Stars had not stopped to question and relieve his late prisoner.

The fellow was much hurt. He had broken an ankle and had almost broken his neck, and his pain was so great he could hardly reply to their questions.

However, he pointed toward the escaping detective and managed to tell them who Hy Hiram was.

Before they could reach the foot of the precipice, Hy Hiram had disappeared on the ledge above, where they hesitated to follow him.

However, by going back farther into the valley they could see him crouching on the ledge in a sheltered place; and one of them took a long range shot at him.

Hy Hiram replied with the one small pistol that remained to him, but the bullet fell short.

It seemed clear to the outlaws that the hated detective had cooped himself in a pocket from which he could not get out except by the path by which he had gone in. The ledge appeared to end farther on.

But not one of the outlaws was bold enough to venture to climb the path and bring him down. The path was so narrow that but one could go up it at a time.

Advancing close up to the ledge, they halted and shouted to him demanding his surrender, and telling him that if he forced them to extra trouble in getting him they would kill him when they laid hands on him.

The answer was unexpected and startling.

One of the large gunpowder bombs dropped in their midst, exploding with a loud report and scattering the earth and loose stones in a spray.

Though none of the outlaws were seriously injured, several were struck by the flying stones, and they were all so terrified that they scattered like a flock of frightened birds.

The Texan Detective laughed, and the puppy dog chirruped, when he saw them running, and observed that their horses were as much terrified as they; but he did not venture to indulge in the hope that he had driven them away.

Nor was he deceived. They came back, in a short time, and, taking a station beyond the reach of a hurled bomb, they again commanded his surrender.

His answer was a pistol shot.

Failing in inducing him to come down, they went into camp just out of pistol range, and sent one of their number away, probably for reinforcements.

Hy Hiram's predicament was not pleasant, and he began to look about to see how he could get away. There was absolutely no path of egress except the one he had ascended.

Two hours passed by; then a dozen horsemen appeared in sight and joined those below. But this addition to the force was of no material service. Hy Hiram could not be taken from his perch without a sacrifice of life, and that they were not inclined to make.

Shots were exchanged at intervals, and three times a messenger came forward to ask him if he were ready to surrender.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE CAPTURE OF HY HIRAM.

Darkness descended, and still the detective crouched on the ledge and the outlaws held the valley. The stars came out, but they scarcely rendered the darkness less intense.

A camp-fire was built, but the detective observed that very few of the outlaws re-

mained near it. The inference was clear that they wanted him to know they were watching the foot of the path, and that he could not hope to escape.

Nevertheless, he was resolved to leave the ledge that night, and as soon as possible.

With this resolution he carefully descended the path, his pistol in one hand and a bomb in the other.

All was as still as the grave, and, as he encountered no foe at the bottom of the way, he was beginning to congratulate himself and stepped forward.

Then he ran plump into the arms of one of the outlaws, and was made aware that several were lying in wait for him.

He wrenched himself loose by desperate exertions, and hurled down the bomb. It exploded with a mighty crash and a rain of fire, before which the outlaws fell back.

But they were not as much afraid of this bomb as they were of the first, and closed about him when he tried to make off.

He had nothing but gunpowder bombs with him, which usually did little damage, and, though he hurled down another, the outlaws set on him and overthrew him.

As he tried to stagger to his feet, when they drew off, the light of a bull's-eye lantern was cast in his face.

"It's him, curse him!"

With this fierce exclamation, the leader fired straight at the detective's breast, with the undoubted intention of killing him.

The Texan Detective fell back and almost tumbled to the earth, for the ball was a heavy one and the range close; but he recovered almost instantly, apparently spat the ball out of his mouth with much gusto, and made the puppy dog chirrup as if he were proud of the feat.

"I'm the seventh son of a seventh son, and I used to have men shoot rifles at me just for the fun of the thing! If you want to try that bullet ag'in, you'll find it hyar in the sand!"

He tried to smile, and the puppy dog chirruped amiably.

The outlaws stared with incredulity.

"Either you're an uncommon sort of man, or you've got a chunk of boiler iron under yer vest!"

The leader came forward, his revolver ready, while the manipulator of the bull's-eye lantern kept the detective under its rays.

It was an ordeal the detective would have avoided, but he could not.

The leader thrust his hands under the detective's garments and his fingers touched the shirt of mail.

"Ah! Boiler iron, as I thought! A regular walkin' monitor! Rip off his coat, boys, and let's see the thing!"

The command was obeyed with much alacrity, and the coat of mail, which had many times saved the detective's life, was exposed to view.

It was removed and held up for inspection and admiration.

So much attention was given it that Hy Hiram began to hope he might be able to dart away into the gloom and escape. His thought seemed to be read, for almost instantly he was tied.

A dozen questions were asked him about the bit of armor, to which he answered, truthfully, that he had found it in a museum; that it had descended from the Middle Ages, and that on more than one occasion it had saved his life.

It was made of steel rings closely woven, and when the outlaws had inspected it to their hearts' content, they set it against a rock, a short distance away, and tried their pistols on it.

Against this hard background of rock the rings were bent in one place, and almost a hole made in the mail, but it resisted the shots wonderfully well.

The question of whose it should be almost precipitated a fight, the leader being inclined to claim it by right of his leadership. This was settled, however, by them casting lots.

The Texan Detective was set on one of the horses, where his hands were tied and his feet bound beneath the horse's belly; then the entire party started up the valley in the direction from whence the

horsemen had appeared. Evidently they intended to take their prisoner to their stronghold.

The active brain of the detective was more active than ever, trying to devise some plan of escape, though his case seemed absolutely helpless.

Several miles were passed over, and many times the direction was changed, until he became bewildered. Though he tried hard by studying the stars and the configuration of the hills to keep track of the route, he found it impossible.

The slopes grew flintier, the hills higher, and the talk of the outlaws told him they were nearing their mountain home.

Then occurred an accident that came near bringing death to the detective, and ultimately gave him his liberty.

The bombs taken from his person had been carefully carried by one of the men, who now let one of them fall with a crash.

The explosion so frightened the horse Hy Hiram rode that it darted away from its companions, and, turning tail, raced wildly down the valley. The detective helplessly bound on its back, unable to guide it or stay its wild career.

Though he commanded and shouted to it, and sought to grip the reins with his teeth, all was ineffectual. The rein broke and dragged beneath its forefeet.

For two miles or more the horse tore along at this terrific speed. All the time the detective strove to loosen his bonds.

Unable to maintain a firm seat, he slipped sidewise, and the horse, taking new fright at this, endeavored to turn, and fell sprawling.

The bonds that held Hy Hiram's feet were snapped, and he was left lying on the ground more dead than alive.

After a while he sufficiently recovered to crawl to the shelter of some sage brush, and there, after a time, he freed his hands.

There, too, he remained until daylight came to guide him, and then he set off in what he believed to be the direction of Maverick City.

He had utterly failed in the attempt which had brought him into the hills.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

FOOLING THE WEASEL.

Not only was the anger of Weasel William aroused by the treatment of Mesquite Mat, but his cupidity was excited by the view he had had of the bagful of gems.

He was resolved to get those gems.

He had heard the talk and he had seen the gems and the gold on the table, by means of the keyhole of the door that opened into the passage.

Therefore, when Diana Temple left the room where she had had the interview, carrying away with her the bag of gems, Weasel William hung at her heels, even though the time was daylight, until he saw her go to her boarding-house and to her room.

He was fairly wild when he found he could not enter the house without his movements being observed, but he returned to the charge that night, and, from a window, like a peeping Tom, he saw Diana Temple change the location of the precious bag.

It had been in a desk, which she seemed to think too risky a place, and he saw her lift the desk up slightly and push the bag beneath it.

When she had done that she went out, and he heard her tell the landlady she would be back in a few minutes.

This was the opportunity he had sought. Disguising himself by tying a handkerchief over his face, he got into the hall that led into her room, and tip-toed along it until he came to the door.

This he opened with a key and let himself into the room, locking the door after him.

Hardly had he done so when he heard Diana returning, and he crept under a lounge, though he was tempted to grab up the buckskin bag and make a desperate dash for it.

Diana came nonchalantly into the room, turned the lamp up higher, and, taking a book, sat down to read.

It must have been a very interesting

book, for it seemed to the scared and cramped Weasel that she sat there for two mortal hours.

Then she threw herself on the bed, without disrobing, and in a half hour more seemed to be sound asleep.

He watched her closely, for her face was turned toward him, and when he was sure she was sound asleep, he cautiously crawled from beneath the lounge and secured the buckskin bag. A thrill of joy went through him as his fingers closed on it.

But this thrill gave way to a start of fear when he heard the click of a pistol, and, glancing around, saw Diana Temple sitting upright on the side of the bed, with a revolver pointed at him.

He had thought it strange that she did not blow out the lamp; now he wondered if it had not been left burning that he might be the more easily trapped.

But he was desperately resolved to retain possession of the gems, so, with a scream that was intended to frighten her, he flung a chair at her and dived for the door.

Her pistol cracked almost at the same instant, but the Weasel was not hit, and, gaining the door, he flung it open and rushed wildly out of the building.

When he had reached the security of the gloom beyond the house he tore the handkerchief mask from his face and scudded on, clutching the buckskin bag.

There was no sound of pursuit, though he knew the landlady and servants must have been aroused by Diana's shot and his scream.

He reached home by devious ways, and, letting himself softly into his room, he drew all the blinds close, and, by the light of a low-turned lamp, gleefully opened the bag. Then he emptied the gems out on the table.

He fell back with a gasping cry.

He saw before him, not the gems, but a number of small pebbles.

Diana Temple had fooled him.

His eyes fairly started from his head, and a bitter curse issued from his lips.

"The she devil! Who'd have thought of a trick like that? And how did she know I was comin' fer the things?"

To have a fortune slip through his fingers in that manner was so tantalizing that he was beside himself with grief and rage.

"Curse her, she fooled me good! But I'll be even with her yet!"

CHAPTER XL.

MESQUITE MAT AND NANCY STACKPOLE.

When the Texan Detective reached Maverick City, night again shadowed the town.

He was tired and hungry, and so stiff from his bruises he could hardly walk, yet he did not seek rest or refreshment, but went straight to the residence of Judge Gale.

He took care not to be seen, and approached the house by the rear.

As he passed up through the grounds, voices that he recognized came from a small outbuilding.

He stopped and listened. They were the voices of Mesquite Mat and Nancy Stackpole!

Instantly the fatigue and pain were forgotten, and he crept near, finally reaching a point where he could look in on the man and woman.

The place was rather dark, but starlight fell through a window and somewhat lighted it. Nancy Stackpole was in a rage, and Mesquite Mat was endeavoring to conciliate her.

With difficulty he repressed the chirrup of the puppy dog. He had often had suspicious thoughts concerning these people, but this was the first time he had caught them in conversation.

"You scoundrel, I'll kill you!"

With this vindictive expression, she drew a knife from some place of concealment and lunged viciously at Mesquite Mat.

The blow was aimed at his breast, and would have slain him if he had not caught her hand.

She fumed wrathfully, struggling to get away, and struck again.

"Curse you, keep still, er I'll smash ye'r head! What do you mean, anyway?"

"Yes; that's the way you talk to me now," she whined. "You was once all honey and cream. Now there's nothin' too mean fer you to do or say!"

He tore the knife from her grasp and held it so she could not get it.

"What in thunder has got into you, tonight, anyway? You send for me to meet you hyar, sayin' you've got somethin' of importance to tell me, and then you go on this way! I reckon you're crazy!"

"You haven't treated me right. You haven't lived up to your promises! After all I've done fer you!"

"Haven't I paid ye?"

"Paid me! Take yer money, Mesquite Mat. I don't want it!"

"What do you want, then?"

"I want you to treat me as you used to!"

He laughed, sneeringly, and the laugh increased her anger.

"As you treated me before that she-devil, Diana Temple, came here! As you used to treat me back in Silverado and Deming."

"Ho, ho! Jealous!"

"You're goin' to marry that woman, I'm told?"

He shuffled uneasily.

"Well, yes, I am! We'll be married inside of a month. That's the bargain she and me have made. What air you goin' to do about it?"

"I'll poison you!" she hissed.

He started; then laughed again.

"You're good at that, but I hardly think you'll work any of ye'r games on me. You tried that once, you know, and you couldn't make it. I've got a mind of my own, Nancy!"

"I can go to these enemies of yours and tell them what I know!"

"And stick your own neck into a halter! You're not a fool yet, Nancy!"

He grew careless as he talked, and before he was aware of it she had the knife out of his hand and was again striking at him with it.

"I'll kill you!" she howled. "You shan't treat me as you've done and live!"

The Texan Detective thought her insane.

She slashed with the viciousness of a wildcat, and the keen blade, catching him in the side, scratched an ugly, though not dangerous, mark.

The pain angered him beyond endurance, and he struck her to the ground.

The blow was a heavy one, and she fell senseless, and, as she fell he lifted a foot as if to stamp her.

The detective was on the point of leaping into the building to prevent this, even though it should expose him, when Mesquite Mat, whose anger seemed to grow as he looked down at the woman, drew a revolver and deliberately fired a ball into her body.

The woman straightened out with a groan and a quiver; and Mesquite Mat, terrified by what he had done, bolted from the place.

The detective placed his fingers to his lips and blew a shrill whistle, which no doubt caused the desperado to run faster. But it also had the effect of assisting to draw Judge Gale out of the house—Gale, who had heard the shot and who was hesitating as to what he should do.

"This way," called Hy Hiram; then darted into the building and tried to lift the woman, who was unconscious.

When Gale appeared, Hy Hiram hastily told what he had witnessed, and a light was procured.

It was then seen that the woman was shot in the body, and was dangerously, and perhaps fatally, wounded.

Together they lifted and carried her into the house, and then the detective hastened to call the doctor.

He came without delay, made an examination, and declared it doubtful if Nancy Stackpole could recover from the wound. The ball had entered on the right side, but had not come out, and could not be found with a probe.

"What shall be done?" was Gale's question. "Better have Mesquite Mat arrested, hadn't we?"

The doctor favored the action, though Hy Hiram doubtfully shook his head.

"If it was a little later, I'd say yes! Mebbe I'll say yes, anyway, before morning!"

"But he'll get out of the town!"

"Not so easy as you may think!" and the puppy dog chirruped. "I've got one or two good men in this burg who are rustling fer me. I will put them to shadderin' him, with orders to nab him if he tries to skip. But he may not try."

"Do you think not?"

"You see, he's banked everything on this election. If he loses it he'll git out of town as quick as he can! If he wins, he'll stay. He'll stay, then, no matter if he is threatened with an arrest for this thing. With his party on top it would be mighty hard to convict him of anything, ye see. It'd be jest about impossible. Every jury would be sure to hang!"

As he talked, Hy Hiram was looking into the worn face of Judge Gale. The change there shown was great. The judge was but a shadow of his former self.

The woman stirred and the men turned toward the bed. But she only put out her hands, called the name of Mesquite Mat and fell back on the pillow.

"There's a black mystery here!" Judge Gale declared.

"Blacker than you think, judge! I don't see my way clear through it just yet, but I ain't afraid but we'll git at the nub of the thing by and by. That's one of the reasons why I want you to go slow about this arrest. I wish I could give out that the woman was killed, and that's it not known how or who done it!"

The doctor shook his head.

"I couldn't consent to a thing of that kind."

"I didn't s'pose you could!" with a regretful sigh. "Jist the same, I wish it might be done!"

"Well, look after her as best you can. I'm goin' to find out what's become of Mesquite Mat."

CHAPTER XLI.

MESQUITE MAT'S FURTHER MOVEMENTS.

Mesquite Mat did not run far when he darted away from the small building where he had left Nancy Stackpole lying. He had shot her in a fit of ungovernable anger, and began to regret it before he had taken a dozen steps.

"She deserted us, though, curse her! Why should she threaten me that way? Hain't I treated her more than right? Did the fool think I was going to marry her? Did she think I was goin' to redeem that crazy promise I made down in Deming? I was a fool, then, and I reckon I've been a bigger fool, now!"

He halted and listened. He was well aware that his shot would bring some one to the scene, and that shrill whistle had reached him.

"Sounded like a policeman's whistle, that did, though somebody must have made it with his fingers. Who was it, now? Judge Gale couldn't blow a blast like that!"

An invisible rope seemed to tug at his heart and draw him to the spot.

"I reckon I'd better go back and see what that means! It never pays to go it blind. Yes, I'll go back!"

He still held his revolver, and he cocked it now, as he softly retraced his way.

Halting a few paces away from the little house, he was able to hear Judge Gale and Hy Hiram conversing; was able to see them by the light of the lantern which was brought, and beheld them bear the form of the woman into the residence.

He shook his fist angrily at the Texan Detective.

"So you're ag'in in the ring? I thought the boys had you safe enough in the hills. They ought to have killed you when they had their grippers on you!"

Word had been brought him of Hy

Hiram's capture, but nothing concerning Hy Hiram's escape by means of the runaway horse.

When the woman was carried into the house, he ascended to the piazza and crept to the window of the room, and through this window he was able to see and hear what took place.

The talk filled him with uneasiness, yet in a measure pleased and satisfied him. He was glad Hy Hiram did not intend to order his immediate arrest.

He did not stay for the close of the conference. Having learned the extent of the woman's injury, and something of the plans of his enemies, he crept stealthily away.

Turning from the main street, he sought the schoolhouse already described, where he found the Weasel acting as guardian, and by whom he was admitted.

Inside the house was a group of Lone Stars.

They had buckskin bags on the table, with some rolls of bills, and their faces wore looks of uneasiness. Mesquite Mat's abrupt entrance did not tend to compose them.

However, he said nothing about what had just occurred, but took a seat at the table and fell into their talk.

"We've counted the whole thing up," one of them stated. "There's two thousand apiece, all around, out of that last swag, with five hundred for the Weasel. He's been kickin' fer a thousand, but we've decided not to give it to him!"

One of the buckskin bags and one of the rolls of bills were pitched across the table to Mesquite Mat.

"Mebbe we'd better make it a thousand fer the Weasel," he suggested. "He's been mighty faithful, you know!"

"Five hundred's a plenty!" was growled.

Mesquite Mat was wise enough to see the uselessness of pushing the subject.

"This divides everything?" he questioned.

"Everything. There'll be no further divvy till after the election. If we win, there'll be more. If we lose—"

The speaker did not seem to think it necessary to complete the sentence.

When the meeting broke up, Mesquite Mat walked away from the place with Weasel William.

They went together to the room back of the gaming apartment, and there Mat counted five hundred dollars out of the roll that had been given him.

"I think you ought to have had a thousand dollars, as you claim. It's your right. Them fellers wouldn't give it to you, but I will. I'm goin' to give it to you out of my own money!"

The Weasel's eyes shone.

"You've stood by me, Weasel! I don't say that I've been pleased with everything you've done, fer I hain't! But I don't hold anything ag'in' ye. You've stood by me an' you've kep' ye'r eyes on fellers that has tried to injure me. I may have spoke a little harsh once or twice, but you'll always find, Weasel, that I play fair."

The heart of the little man was quite won. He instantly forgot the hard feelings he had harbored against Mesquite Mat.

"I've alwu's tried to do the right thing by ye!" he avowed.

"Of course you have, Weasel. And there's ye'r money. 'Tain't but a few days now till the election. They're goin' to be days mighty full of danger to me too. Now, I'll tell you what I want you to do. I want you to hang at my heels right along. If you see anybody follerin' me er shadderin' me, tell me about it right away."

"I've reason to think that spies are goin' to be put on my track; and that they'll try to arrest me, er do me up, er somethin' of the kind, before election, to put me out of the way, ye see. I want you to keep 'em from doin' it!"

The Weasel hugged the money to his heart with unfeigned delight.

"I'll stand by ye!" he promised. "You may bet your life you can depend on me!"

CHAPTER XLII.

IN THE CAMP OF THE OUTLAWS.

Too long have the fortunes of Gladys Gale and the Sport from Spokane been neglected.

It will be recalled that they were led into the hills, and that the sport was thrust into a cavern and held there a prisoner, while Gladys was separated from him and taken away.

She was not taken far, however. The canyon opened out into a valley, a few hundred yards below, where there were a stream and grass for the ponies.

Here was one of the camps of the outlaws. It consisted of a half dozen mud and stone houses. They were set against the face of a cliff, and, viewed from a little distance, resembled the cliff-houses of the Southwest.

The location was not only isolated, but it was almost impregnable against anything but a considerable force, for it could only be approached by means of the canyon.

In one of these queer houses Gladys Gale was installed, and she was assured that no harm should come to her if she did not try to escape. Most horrible things might befall her, however, she was told, if she attempted to leave the place—not the least of which was the danger that she would be torn to pieces by wolves in the hills.

Hardly had she accustomed herself to her surroundings, when one of the outlaws advanced and made her a respectful bow.

She started, in some surprise, for she had known the fellow in Maverick City, and he there bore a fair reputation.

"You didn't expect to see me here, Miss Gladys. I have always been a friend of yours, you know, and so when the boss said that some one would have to watch over you, I asked for the privilege. I thought perhaps I could prevent any unpleasant surveillance."

Tom Boyd was a man of fair education and comely appearance, and though she now knew him to be an outlaw, she could not help being impressed by his evident thoughtfulness.

"You would favor me more if you could persuade your chief to let me go. I don't see what he can accomplish by holding me here."

"I wish I could!" he declared, earnestly. "I may as well tell you, though, that he'll not let you go till after the election, and that if it can be done Judge Gale and the leaders of the opposition ticket will be brought here too. I don't think myself that it can be done, unless they are fools enough to just throw themselves into our hands."

"Who is your boss?"

He smiled amiably, but would not answer.

"What did you do with the Sport from Spokane?"

He took a seat on a rock beside the door and began to whittle at a stick.

"He's in that hole up in the canyon, and he'll likely stay there. I'm sorry for him, and that's a fact."

"Why do you herd with such men, Mr. Boyd?"

The answer was an evasion.

She studied Tom Boyd, as they talked, and reached the swift and correct conclusion that the scamp was in love with her, and she began to wonder if this admiration might not be used to her benefit.

He went away shortly, and she walked up and down in front of her hut, endeavoring to elaborate some plan that would bring her release.

She saw that she was to be given considerable liberty, and she extended her walk farther and farther.

When she began to think it might be possible for her to make her way back into the canyon, Boyd appeared before her, having come by a path of which she had no knowledge.

Throughout the day she made several such excursions, only to find herself under constant, though distant surveillance.

Finally she determined to again speak to him, and beckoned him to join her.

"Mr. Boyd, do you value my good opinion?"

He flushed as she asked this, looked keenly at her, and then said:

"More than anything else on earth."

"Then help me to get away from here," leaning forward and laying a hand on his arm.

He shrank back as if struck a blow.

"You don't know what it is you ask me, Miss Gladys! It would be more than my life is worth to be even caught talking of such a thing. These are desperate men, and life is of little value to them, when it stands in their way. They would as soon shoot me as to look at me, if they thought me untrue to the vows I have taken."

"But you could leave them! Ally yourself with my father's party, and put yourself under their protection."

He smiled as if he thought this protection not worth much, then grew more serious as he reiterated his declaration that he was powerless to do more than shield her while she remained in the camp.

After considerable vain pleading she turned and entered her hut.

Again and again the following day did she renew her importunities, and toward evening she began to have hopes of success, as she saw him wavering.

When he brought her supper and placed it on the box which served as a table, she threw herself at his feet, and, catching his hand, cried:

"Tom, if you have any hope of Heaven, do not refuse me this! If you do not care to take me all the way to Maverick City, only let me out of this canyon, and I'll try to get back home alone. I beg of you, let me go!"

He sank down, and for an instant covered his face with his hands. When he raised his head she saw his face was haggard and drawn.

"If it were not for the love I bear you I would not listen to you for an instant! I was a fool for placing myself in the way of such temptation. Yes, I'll help you out of here, if I hang for it!"

"Thank God!" was her fervent exclamation; then, woman-like, she burst into tears. When she again looked up she was alone.

She could not eat, and kept pacing up and down the narrow room, wondering if Tom Boyd would weaken even after his promise to her.

The hours crept by, until it was nearly midnight, and still Tom Boyd did not come back.

Then she heard a soft tap at her door, which she had closed.

"Miss Gladys!" came in Tom Boyd's voice.

She sprang forward and opened the door.

"I have just come to say that if you will be ready in ten minutes I will come for you. I have two horses down the canyon. The guards are to be changed in an hour, and I want to pass these who are sleepy and less watchful. I'll take a look about, and then come back."

Without waiting for a reply, he hurried away.

There was nothing for Gladys to do toward getting ready, as she had not undressed.

Soon she heard again the soft footfall of Tom Boyd.

"Just slip your hand in mine, and don't say a word. Walk as lightly as possible, and obey the least motion I may make. I don't want to speak again till we are out of the camp."

She pressed his hand to show that she understood; then together they passed softly out into the night.

Gladys Gale had never felt such fear in her life, yet she did not hesitate. Silent as two shadows they slipped past the cliff houses, keeping within the dark space next the walls.

When they had passed the last of these houses she began to breathe easier. But her fears increased, as she just then caught the low tones of the guards.

There were two of these, one stationed at each side of the narrow, crevice-like opening through which the path into the camp ran.

But the guards, tired of the solitude, had both taken positions on the same side of the path, thinking they could as well watch and at the same time converse.

Boyd, who was familiar with every foot of the pass, now left the path and climbed slowly and carefully up the mountain on the side opposite the guards.

They had succeeded in getting beyond the guards, and were again descending to the path, when Gladys' foot struck a small boulder, sending it crashing down into the canyon.

"Who goes there?" came the instant question.

The guard waited a second for reply, then called:

"Answer, or I'll fire!"

"Now, run for your life!" whispered Tom Boyd, grasping her hand still tighter and fairly lifting her from the ground as he ran swiftly down the mountain.

At that instant the guard's rifle spoke, and this shot was followed by others in rapid succession, till the gorge seemed filled with a whole battalion.

The camp was aroused, and instantly the girl captive was missed.

But the fugitives had gained the horses, which were standing with their bridles thrown over their heads ready for instant mounting.

Boyd lifted the girl to her saddle, then sprang to the back of his own horse.

"Your pony will follow mine! Keep him at his best gait, and hold on!"

Then he swung into a gallop, and they clattered down the canyon.

But already the sounds of pursuit could be heard.

For some time they kept up this break-neck speed, Gladys wondering how the surefooted little beasts kept from going down, so rough and uneven was the way. Then Boyd slackened his pace.

"The way is smoother now, and you'd better go ahead. If the boys come up with me, ride on, and I'll hold them back. And remember, Gladys, if I fall, that it was for love of you that I proved a traitor to the boys!"

"And may God bless you for it!" she said, fervently, as she pushed past him and rode swiftly on.

The hoofstrokes of the pursuers came distinctly, and in a little while the command rang out:

"Halt, or I fire!"

An instant later a rifle ball struck the ground at the side of Gladys' horse.

This report was followed by another, and Gladys felt her horse stagger—then both went down in a heap.

Boyd's horse leaped over the fallen pony, but another ball, at that instant, struck Boyd, tumbling him almost at Gladys' side.

They were soon surrounded by the outlaws, who crowded up, asking eager questions.

Gladys was not hurt, and was helped to her feet, again a prisoner of Mesquite Mat's men.

But brave Tom Boyd had received his death wound, and, as the outlaws raised him up, he gasped:

"I guess you served me right, boys; but I wish the little girl was safe. I did it for love of her!"

Then he turned to Gladys, who had come to him.

"I'm sorry you have to go back, but I did what I could. I might have been a better man, if I had known you sooner, Gladys!"

CHAPTER XLIII.

OUT IN THE SUNLIGHT.

The days passed drearily to Caleb Strong in his cell-like prison. He saw no one but his guard, who brought him his meals, but steadily refused to so much as answer a question.

But as time passed the guard grew less and less careful in his watching, and the sport detective's fertile brain began to evolve schemes for escape.

One day, as he lay just within the opening of the cave, he heard voices, and knew that the guard had a visitor.

"She's down there in the first hut. Since she tried to skip, the boss has had her watched closer and kept locked in. You know he was a little loose with her at first, bein' she's a woman!"

Every nerve was aquiver as Caleb

Strong listened to these words, for he knew they could refer to no one but Gladys Gale.

But, listen as he would, he could hear nothing further, and, in a short time, silence reigned, and he knew the guard was once more alone.

"I'm going to get out of here, or kill that guard trying!" was his determined avowal.

He had learned that the guard, after each meal, sat with a stub pipe, half asleep, only a short distance from the opening of the cave.

This opening was partially closed with a board door, which was leaned up against the cave, leaving a space at one side through which the prisoner got his only air and light. The door was held in place by a heavy beam that was swung from one side of the entrance.

Caleb Strong had more than once attempted to move this door, but had never succeeded.

Now, as he again put his whole strength to the task, he thought he felt the door give a little. Another hard push assured him he was not mistaken—the door had become a little loosened.

He left off working at it, thinking it best to wait till after the evening meal, when the guard would be busy with his pipe.

That night he ate none of the supper the guard pushed through the opening.

But, when the guard had taken his pipe, the sport once more set to work on the door.

By pushing straight out he succeeded in loosening the door, and after several attempts he moved the door aside far enough to get his head through the opening. It proved hard work, and he made frequent halts to rest and get his breath.

With some further effort the space was made wide enough to allow his body to pass through, and he lay panting on the outside.

He remained still for a time, allowing his nerves to quiet and his muscles to assume their wonted strength.

Then, flat on the ground, he pushed himself slowly toward where the guard was half dozing.

The outlaw was all unsuspecting, until he felt the fingers of the sport from Spokane pressing his windpipe. He tried to turn about, but those fingers were like steel bands, holding him helpless. He kicked at the shins of the sport, but no attention was paid to this.

The sport made no effort at anything but choking the guard into insensibility.

This did not take long, and then, with the silk scarf from his own neck he deftly bound the hands of the outlaw, and waited with such patience as he could command, for the outlaw to regain consciousness.

The sport had relieved the guard of all his weapons, and, when he finally sat erect, he found himself looking into the tube of one of his own revolvers.

"Now, my man, I've been a very good prisoner, and I'll be equally good as a custodian, if you'll walk along and obey everything I say. But, if you don't walk straight, I'll shoot the head off you!"

"Now, take me to where they have imprisoned the young woman!"

"Don't know nothin' 'bout no woman!"

"I'll give you just two minutes to start. And you're to go directly to where she is!"

For an instant the man hesitated, then started sullenly down the path.

The detective kept close at his heels, with the muzzle of the revolver touching his temple.

When they reached the first of the row of huts the outlaw stopped.

"This is it, eh? If I find you've made a mistake you'll be the first to cross the river. I'm sorry to discommode you, but—"

With this he stepped forward and inserted his handkerchief into the guard's mouth, having first made a secure knot in the center of it, and tied it behind the guard's ears.

Then, still holding the pistol at the guard's head, the detective tapped softly at the door.

"Who's there?" came in Gladys' voice.

"Tis I, Caleb Strong!"

Instantly there came the swish of a woman's dress, and the door was opened.

"Now, my dear fellow, please accommodate me by walking in there. I'd prefer you to take the lead!"

When the outlaw was safe inside, Caleb Strong turned to Gladys, took her in his arms, and kissed her on the lips.

"At last, my darling, I am with you again!"

Then he hurriedly told her of his escape, and that he had now come for her.

Her story was much more thrilling, though it occupied but little time in telling.

"And can you guide me to where those horses are kept?" was his eager question.

"I don't know, but I think I can. Tom Boyd had led those we rode a short distance from the others, but I think I can find them."

"Then get me something to tie this fellow, and we'll be off."

She brought one of the blankets from her rude bed, which the sport proceeded to cut in strips. These he bound tightly about the outlaw's legs, and once more examined the gag and hand bandages.

"I think he's safe till some one happens in. Now, come! And be as still as the proverbial mouse!"

He took her hand, as Tom Boyd had done, and together they stepped out of the house, and along the course she had previously taken.

They passed the houses in safety, and, by a little detour, reached the place where the ponies were grazing.

"Now I think you'd better stand here while I catch the ponies. They might make a noise at sight of a woman!"

The sport hurried away, and it seemed but a moment till he was back, leading two of the outlaws' ponies.

He had brought a large piece of the blanket with him from her hut, and now proceeded to make hackamores for the horses.

"You'll have to ride without a saddle. Now, we're ready!"

He lifted her to the back of the largest and stoutest horse, then swung lightly up on the other, and they started slowly and cautiously down the canyon.

The detective strained his hearing to the utmost, and was the first to catch the low sound of the guards' voices.

"Hold the horses here, and don't get frightened if I am gone some time. I've got to do something with those guards!"

He handed her the strip of flannel with which to hold his horse and slipped away in the darkness.

As he neared the place where he thought the guards were—for the sound of their talking had ceased—he became extra cautious.

Finally he located one of the men, and crept forward with the stealth of an Indian.

The guard began to whistle softly as he paced up and down in his short beat.

"I wish he'd sit down, or at least stop that walking!"

Then the sport saw, by the starlight, that the guard had done just as he wanted him to, and, a moment later, his strong fingers closed over the guard's Adam's apple.

There was a short struggle, which caught the sharp ears of the other guard, who sang out:

"What's the matter, pard?"

The sport muttered some inarticulate reply, and then began hurriedly to tie the guard with the strips of flannel blanket he had brought.

But the other guard's suspicion had been aroused, and the detective could hear him coming across the little ravine.

But by the time the distrustful guard reached the sport, the bound man had been rolled to one side, out of sight.

"What's the row? I thought somethin' was wrong!"

Hardly had the words left the man's lips, when he received a stunning blow from the detective's outlying fist that sent him sprawling.

The blow caught him full in the stomach, and he was as limp as a rag as the detective bound him.

Then the sport gagged the two men and

started back to where he had left Gladys with the horses.

"Did the time seem long? I was gone over an hour, but I had to go slow getting up to the fellows. After that, the work was quick, and I guess there's nothing to fear from them."

Then the two rode away from the outlaws' camp, each minute making more sure the security they felt.

But when they thought they were free from pursuit, a party of four rode out of a side canyon just at their rear.

CHAPTER XLIV.

ON A RUNAWAY ENGINE.

"Dear Sir: If you will call on me at the Silver Bar, in Crawley, to-night, I will tell you of something important to you, and to your party. Come disguised as a fireman. The fireman of the through freight that leaves Maverick City at ten o'clock is a chum of mine, and he will let you ride through in his place. He will ride in the caboose, to take your place when you reach Crawley. This is important. Do not fail me."

"A FRIEND TO JUDGE GALE."

His Miram read and reread this note till he had it almost by heart.

He had found it on the table in his room, and, on questioning the hotel clerk, had been told that no one, as far as the clerk knew, had visited the room during his absence.

While the detective knew there was cause to fear treachery from a note brought thus surreptitiously, there was something so seemingly ingenuous about it that he decided to go to Crawley.

"If it wasn't for Mesquite Mat and that shootin'! I don't see hardly how I can leave Maverick now!"

Nevertheless, he hastened into the street.

He had seen nothing of Mesquite Mat since the latter had hurried from Judge Gale's after shooting Nancy Stackpole. But he had put two of his best men to look up Mat, and had given instructions to them to keep Mat constantly in surveillance and arrest or shoot him if he attempted to leave the town.

"I'll jest have time to fill up my stum-mick," he thought, as he entered a restaurant and called for some hot coffee and a lunch.

After leaving the restaurant, where he had eaten as coolly as if no thought of danger haunted him, he walked down to the depot.

As he stepped upon the platform he felt a touch on his arm, and, turning, saw a man dressed in the blue overalls of a fireman.

"Air you the man as wants to go to Crawley?"

"Yes. What am I wanted there for?"

"Don't know nothin', only Jim says, sez he, 'I want you to let a friend of mine come down what hain't got the money to pay and is willin' to work his way.' And the engineer says as how he don't care who fires, so's he's a good likely feller that kin pitch coal. And I'm as willin' to ride down without workin' as you kin be to work your way!"

"But she's about ready to pull out, an' if you don't want to back down, you'd better skin inter these overhauls, an' git on that engine!"

He had been pulling off his outer garments, as he spoke, and the detective, without further ado, pulled them on over the clothes he wore.

"You're jist to do whatever the engineer tells ye, and to go straight to the Silver Bar, when ye git to Crawley. I'll be there on the platform to take ye'r place at the engine!"

The shrill whistle sounded, and the detective hurried onto the engine.

"You must be mighty anxious to work," was all the engineer said to him, as he pointed to the shovel and the furnace.

Then the train pulled out, and the detective had started on a perilous journey, but with all his wits about him.

The engineer took his place, and nothing more was said, as mile after mile was swiftly passed over.

They entered a deep, dark cut, and soon

the detective felt the engine give a quick start, like a horse that has been struck a blow.

He was stooping to throw on more coal, and, as he turned, he felt a heavy stroke on his shoulder and neck, and fell sprawling.

"I guess that's done him!" came faintly in the voice of the engineer.

The engine cleared the cut, and the detective, partly regaining his senses, saw that the engineer had jumped and that he was alone on the engine.

Then he felt the rapidity with which the apparently living thing was bounding forward, and immediately leaped to the correct conclusion that the engine had been cut loose from the train and all steam had been turned on.

But he felt so stunned and helpless that for a time he could not even think distinctly.

Then came the remembrance of the short curves and steep grades of the mountain road, and he knew he was being carried to his death, if something was not speedily done. The engineer had thought to kill him and lead the world to believe he had been killed when the runaway engine left the track.

Still the detective could not summon strength to pull himself to his feet.

Finally, after many efforts, and when the engine was racing at sixty miles an hour, he succeeded in drawing himself to his knees and crawling to the engineer's place.

How he managed to shut off steam and reverse the engine he never knew. But, after a time, he came to his right senses and found the engine standing still, on the track.

His neck and shoulder pained him terribly, but he managed to run the engine back to where the train had been stopped, just outside the cut.

Then he turned the engine over to the trainmen, who ran it on to Crawley, much to the engineer's ill-concealed fear.

At Crawley the detective had his neck and shoulder examined and dressed, telling the doctor as he had told the trainmen, that he must have struck a projection when he fell in the engine, and then he returned to Maverick by the first passenger train.

"Fooled again," was his thought. "But I'll come out all right in the end."

CHAPTER XLV.

JUDGE GALE'S GRIEF AND ANGER.

Judge Gale was fairly wild over the mysterious disappearance of his daughter. For a time it so paralyzed his energies that he was unable to make any headway against his opponents. He instituted searches, and offered rewards, all to no purpose.

Nancy Stackpole lay delirious throughout the night in which she had been shot by Mesquite Mat, and continued in that condition, with conscious intervals. But neither in her ravings nor in her sane moments did she say a word to implicate him.

The fire of the "Brand" wavered and lost vigor, and the judge's enemies took heart in proportion as his friends lost courage.

At the close of the second day of Nancy Stackpole's illness, she roused for a few moments, and, looking earnestly at Gale, hollowly whispered the name of Mesquite Mat.

"What is it?" Gale questioned, stepping to the bed.

She turned away from him, without replying, but he had leaped to a quick conclusion. He believed she had been on the point of telling him that Mesquite Mat was the one who had caused the disappearance of his daughter.

A great rage against Mat swelled in his heart. No matter what the political consequences, he felt he would like to meet Mat on the street and shoot him.

With this feeling he sallied out, and went toward the Maverick Corral. Before the Corral was reached, he saw Mesquite Mat walking in his direction, and he halted till Mat came up.

"I want a word with you!" he said.

His tone was so menacing that Mat dropped a hand to his hip as he wheeled around.

"That woman up at the house, Nancy Stackpole, has said something that makes me believe—"

Mat paled and lifted his hand as if to wave an accusation aside. He was thinking Nancy had accused him of shooting her.

"What does she know about me? I hope you're not fool enough, judge, to believe anything she says that concerns me. Why, I'm hardly acquainted with her."

"An evasion like that won't work, Mat. I've seen you talking to her more than once. She's out of her head, but she rouses up once in a while and she said something a while ago that told me you know where Gladys is."

"If she said that she lies!"

"Well, then, I say it!"

His revolver came out like a flash.

"I say it on my own responsibility, Mesquite Mat. You know where my daughter is, and I want you to tell me!"

"Put up that there pistol, and I will talk to you! If you don't, I won't. I'm not fool enough to argue with a man that's got the drop on me."

The judge curbed his temper, and put the pistol back.

"Now, tell me where she is. You know!"

"I don't know, but I've an idea."

"Out with it, then!"

"It's just this—and I only repeat what I've heard said on the streets—that that daughter of yours eloped with that detective who calls himself the Sport from Spokane."

The words had not crossed his lips before the judge slapped him in the mouth.

"You scoundrel, to slander my daughter in that way! You know that's a vile slander, and you never heard a word of it!"

Mesquite Mat tried to get out a weapon, but the judge knocked it out of his hand, and then flew at his throat like an enraged tiger.

"Take that back or I'll choke your black heart out!"

Clutching Mesquite Mat by the throat, he shoved him violently to the wall and began to beat his head against it.

The judge was a powerful man, and now his wrath made him a very Samson.

"Take it back!" he howled. "Take it back, or I'll murder you right here!"

Mesquite Mat was helpless in his grasp. Fortunately for Mat, the encounter took place but a few paces from the door of the Maverick Corral, around which men were congregated, and these now rushed to separate the combatants.

Several of them were pals of Mesquite Mat, and they seized the judge and drew him away.

Mesquite Mat's rage was quite as great as that of the judge, and as soon as he felt the choking grasp removed, he began to beg for a revolver.

"None of that, now," his friends advised. "Drop it right here!"

They were so afraid a general fight would be precipitated, with what result none could foresee, that they dragged the struggling gambler from the place and immured him in the gaming room until his anger subsided.

As for Judge Gale, the heated incident proved really beneficial. It inspired him with new life and vigor.

He hurried to the office of the "Brand," which paper he was now trying to edit without assistance, and worked off his venom in a stinging article.

It was in the nature of a defiance to his foes, and a portion of it ran as follows:

"My course in Maverick City has been open and above board. I have never stooped to midnight assassinations and kidnapping, nor have I used the darkness as a shield to cover up misdeeds. All these things I charge against those men of Maverick City who are trying to ruin me.

"The leader of those men is a contemptible gambler, who has made himself notorious under the name of Mesquite Mat. He and I had a little altercation on the street this morning, a full account of which will be found in the local columns. I mention it here only as a passing incident. I accused him at that time of having knowledge of the whereabouts of my daughter, Gladys; and charged that he or some members of the ring had abducted her, thinking, by so doing, to so distract me as to unfit me for the work of the campaign.

"I am sure I was correct in making the charge, and I can tell them here that they will fail in their object. And I will tell them, further, that if so much as a hair of her head comes to harm, I will hunt them down, one by one, and kill them with as little compunction as if they were wolves.

"I know it to be a fact, and can prove it when the time comes, that they held me a prisoner in the same way that they have tried to kill me, since; that they now hold as a prisoner, or have killed, the man known as the Sport from Spokane, who has won their enmity by the firmness with which he has opposed them, and that on more than one occasion they have also tried to kill the man known as Hy Hiram, whom they claim to be a detective.

"But I hereby assure them that the death of any of these parties will avail them nothing, but will the sooner introduce them to the hangman's noose, to which they are hurrying."

But for the influence of Hy Hiram, Judge Gale, in this article, would have accused Mesquite Mat of the shooting of Nancy Stackpole, but the promise made to the Texan Detective stayed his pen.

The other matter, in the ensuing edition of the "Brand," was quite as "hot" in its character as that which has been quoted, and, coming on the verge of the election, gave to his enemies a panicky feeling.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE WEASEL CROWDED INTO A CORNER.

Judge Gale worked at the office of the "Brand" until a late hour that night, receiving there the reports and advice of his friends, as well as their congratulations on the character of the paper just issued.

As he left the office he encountered the Texan Detective, at the corner above, and walked on with him toward the detective's stopping place.

There was much to talk about, and when the hotel was reached the judge went on up to the detective's room for the purpose of there continuing the conversation.

As they passed through the corridor and approached the door, they became aware that some one was in the room.

It was Weasel William, who, as they drew near, tried to bolt into the corridor and make his escape.

But Judge Gale caught him by the collar and drew him back into the apartment.

"You're just the man we want to see!"

Hy Hiram planted himself before the Weasel, with arms akimbo, wreathed his face in smiles, and made the puppy dog chirrup with all its old time vigor.

"I'll say to you in the first place, Weasel, that you show yourself the biggest fool this side the Golden Gate, when you try to find out anything about me by searching my room. You don't really think I'm idiot enough to keep dockyments, and money, an' sich, here, do ye?"

The Weasel did not reply; he only cowered and sunk appealingly into a chair.

Judge Gale put himself in front of the cringing little man, with the sternest of looks.

"You haven't seen the "Brand" this evening, have you? If you have seen it you will know that I've got you fellows dead to rights!"

"For one thing, I know that you chaps that we call the "ring" have possession of

Gladys, and that they took her or drove her away from Maverick City.

"I have enough evidence against you, Weasel, to convict you of highway robbery in any court of the land. I think, too, that it wouldn't be difficult to fasten on you the crime of murder, or at least complicity in the crime of murder."

The Weasel tried bravely to smile at the charge.

"Now, you know where Gladys is!"

"I don't know anything of the kind."

"You know that she is being held by friends of Mesquite Mat!"

The little man shut his lips and was silent.

"They hold her, and they hold my pard, the Sport from Spokane!" said the Texan Detective, producing a cord. "Now, you kin talk, or we'll tie you up! I'm not going to say we'll kill you, fer we're not going to; but we'll tie you up, and we'll hold you until after the election, just as your friends are holding the sport and the judge's daughter."

It was an effective threat.

"What do you want me to say?"

"Just the truth. She's held by some of Mesquite Mat's friends?"

"Now, looky here, pards; it's as much as my head is worth to go to blabbin'! You know that! If you'll ask me anything that I can tell without at the same time cuttin' my own throat, why, I'll do the best I kin by ye!"

"Where is Gladys Gale and the Sport from Spokane?"

"I've already told you I don't know, but they're held somewhere in the hills by men who belong to our side. They haven't been hurt an' they hain't goin' to be hurt. Not but the boys would like well enough to put 'em out of the way, I don't doubt, if they thought it was policy!"

"Mesquite Mat told you that?"

"Well, he hinted it, though I heard the story from others."

Judge Gale came closer, his fingers working convulsively and his eyes blazing, and the Weasel seemed to grow smaller, through fear.

"What's their plan of campaign?" the Texan Detective questioned.

The Weasel's eyes brightened, with a look of victory and hope.

"I don't mind sayin' that they've counted noses and have the election dead sure."

The judge sat down at the table and began to write with haste.

"You've got to sign this," holding up the written sheet. "I have written down what you've said about my daughter and the sport!"

"Now, isn't it a fact that they intend, if possible, to remove me and Hy Hiram?—to hold us as they hold Gladys and the sport?"

"I'll be killed if I sign a thing like that!" wailed the Weasel.

"Haven't you heard some such plan?"

The Weasel was afraid to deny and afraid to confess.

Gale turned to the desk and added to the writing this further confession.

Then he pushed the paper and the pen to the prisoner.

"Sign that!"

"Even if them air facts, I'll be killed fer signin' 'em!"

It was clear that the judge and the detective intended to coerce the Weasel, for the detective now thrust the muzzle of his revolver alarmingly near the Weasel's writhing face.

"Sign that!"

Without further remonstrance the Weasel fixed his name to the damaging confession.

"This thing goes into the 'Brand' tomorrow!" Gale declared, folding the paper, when he had blotted it, and putting it in his pocket. "If it don't cause scatteration, I'll be mistaken!"

Weasel William's knees fairly knocked together.

"That ain't jist a fair deal now, is it? You make me sign that and then go and publish it, an' the first one of the boys I meet after the paper comes out, will fill me full of holes!"

His air of fright was comical, although so serious.

"If you're afraid of these friends of yours, you may stay here in Hy Hiram's room, or in some room at my house, till after the election, and when the election's over it will be a brave member of the Lone Star ring that will dare to show himself!"

The Weasel shook his head and held to the chair in fright.

"I can't! I can't!"

"Just the same, it goes in the paper! And now, if Hy Hiram is through with you, you may run along to the Maverick Corral and tell your patron saint, Mesquite Mat, what we've done and what sort of a confession you've signed."

The Weasel was glad enough to get out of the chair and out of the room, and no sooner was the consent given than he leaped for the corridor and vanished.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE WEASEL AT HIS OLD TRICKS.

Though the Weasel was glad to get out of the house, he had no notion of leaving the vicinity. He was resolved to get that paper and destroy it before it could be used to his undoing.

How to accomplish this, however, passed beyond any plans he could then formulate.

Judge Gale was as jubilant as the Weasel was depressed. He did not long remain in the detective's room, but went out into the street, and walked thoughtfully toward the office of the "Brand."

The Texan Detective accompanied him a few paces, then thinking it likely the Weasel might be hiding near, but when the Weasel was not to be seen, he turned back, and Gale went on alone.

The Weasel, though, was at Judge Gale's heels, and remained there.

He saw Gale meet one of his printers and go on with him toward the office, and he was only a few yards behind them when they entered the office.

Creeping close up to one of the windows, he watched the two, as they lighted the lamp and moved about the room.

Judge Gale took out of his pocket the paper he had forced the Weasel to sign, and gave it to the compositor, and Weasel heard him say:

"Set this up as quick as you can, and if I don't get back before you're done, bring the copy up to my house. I don't want to lose it!"

Then Gale departed from the office, leaving the compositor picking away at the type.

The Weasel was in a state of high excitement. He could hardly remain still at the window, though silence was so necessary, but continued to shift from one foot to the other, and to writhe with as much uneasiness as if in pain.

He almost fancied he could read the words written on the paper. He could see it was the same paper, and it set him wild to think that the forced confession was to be given to the public through the medium of the "Brand."

He could plainly see that the compositor had been "boozing" during the day, and on this fact he began to build his hopes.

The minutes dragged, as the printer picked out his type, one at a time, but the Weasel finally had the satisfaction of seeing the "copy" hung on a hook and the printer preparing to leave the office for a few minutes to get a drink at the nearest saloon.

The Weasel slipped as close to the door as he dared, and when the printer had hurried as fast as his shaky legs would carry him down the street, the Weasel reached for the door knob.

To his disgust, he found the door locked, but a quick wrench forced the door open, as the tipsy printer had but half turned the lock.

Once inside the office, the Weasel's first move was to turn the light down till the room was so dark he would not be readily recognized by any chance passer.

Then he hurried to the hook where he had seen the printer hang his "copy," se-

cured the precious paper and thrust it into a pocket.

"Lucky fer me that feller's thirst broke out fresh!" he muttered. "Ef he had minded Judge Gale and held on to this paper, I'd 'a' had a heap sight more trouble."

Then he slunk over to where the printer had left his galley, and deliberately proceeded to "pi" the type.

"That'll fix 'em!" he chuckled. "They won't have neither copy ner nothing else. An' my word's as good as theirs!"

As he sneaked away from the office, his guilty fears turned every shadow into the returning printer, but when he had walked a block or more, his courage came back.

He started for the Maverick Corral to acquaint Mesquite Mat with what had occurred, but suddenly stopped.

"If I tell him I've peached on the boys once, he'll think I'd do it ag'in! An' like as not he'll shoot me fer it!"

The more he thought of it, the more he dreaded to face Mesquite Mat.

He walked slowly on, taking the opposite direction from the Corral, and coming to a dark alley, slipped down it some distance.

"Guess I'd better get rid o' the thing. If Judge Gale happens back there, he'll be on my trail in no time!"

He drew out a match, twisted the accusing paper into a tight roll, and soon had the satisfaction of seeing his confession crumbled to ashes.

Then hearing a footstep entering the alley, he scudded on, and was soon in the busy throng of the street.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

OLD FRIENDS FALL OUT.

Hy Hiram had spent many hours in shadowing Diana Temple, in fruitless efforts to unravel the mystery surrounding her.

He had discovered that she made frequent excursions at night, clothed as a young man, and that she was seen much with Mesquite Mat and his Lone Stars. He was not inclined to think very highly of a young woman who would so conduct herself.

Standing in the shadow of a piazza corner, at the residence of Judge Gale, he was more than ever mystified by what he beheld.

He had followed Diana to the house—she being again disguised as a young man—and he now saw her in close and familiar conversation with the judge.

He recalled that Gale had never satisfactorily explained why Diana Temple had left his service, nor had there ever been any explanation of the visits Diana had been accustomed to make to Gladys.

By moving nearer, he could hear what they were saying, though the window between him and them was closed.

Then he saw her take from her pocket a buckskin bag and empty its contents into the judge's hands.

He started in intense surprise, when he saw that the bag contained gems of the greatest value, chiefly diamonds.

"They're what Mesquite Mat gave me, and they'll be safer with you. Twice already an effort has been made to rob me. The first time I know the would-be robber was Weasel William, and I'm inclined to think he made the second attempt."

Judge Gale poured the gems into a handkerchief and let them slide lovingly through his fingers.

"My, they're beauties! What's their value?"

She held one up so that the light struck it fairly.

"Mat said fifty thousand, and I don't doubt they're worth every cent of it!"

The Texan Detective was bewildered. He did not understand this business at all. He could see it was possible Mesquite Mat might trust a vast sum with this young woman whom he expected to make his wife, but he could not see why she would transfer such a treasure to Judge Gale.

Judge Gale closed the handkerchief on the jewels and sat erect.

"I thought I heard a step!" he said.

The sound of a footstep then came distinctly to the ears of Hy Hiram from the opposite piazza.

The judge arose hastily and opened the door, to find Silver Sol standing there, uncertain whether to retreat or advance.

"I was told that Mesquite Mat came up this way," he apologized. "I was about to tap, when I saw through the window that you had company!"

The judge bit his lip.

"He isn't here, nor has he been here. Will you walk in?"

Diana Temple had slipped back so that she could not be seen by the caller.

"No, thank ye! Ef he ain't hyar, I'll be makin' myself skeerce!"

He was anxious to get away, and when he was gone the judge closed the door and carefully drew the curtains.

"I don't know what he saw. I hope he didn't see anything!"

The Texan Detective could hear this, but could not see into the house.

"It makes me uneasy," Diana declared, beginning to talk again of Mesquite Mat.

"He's such a friend of Mat's, you know, I'm afraid he'll go straight and tell, if he saw anything. If he does, I'll have to do some mighty tall lying!"

"What in the dickens does that young woman mean?"

The detective scratched his head, his muddled condition growing.

"I guess I can trust you to do that, if it becomes necessary," and the judge laughed. "You're about as slick a one as I ever saw!"

Diana rose and declared she must go.

"I'll be glad when this is all over, so we can quit this subterfuge," she said, as she gave him her hand at the door.

"So will I! Deucedly glad! Good-by! Take care of yourself!"

She left the house immediately, and the Texan Detective followed her—or rather followed the seeming young man whom he knew to be Diana Temple.

Probably an anxiety concerning the story that Silver Sol might tell caused her to go to the little room back of the gaming apartment at the Maverick Corral.

Here, also, the detective pursued her, reaching the same point by way of the rear of the building, and crouching in an adjoining room, which he entered by means of a skeleton key.

Silver Sol, already there, had been talking earnestly to Mesquite Mat and other members of the Lone Star organization.

Apparently there had been a meeting of the Lone Stars for political or other reasons, which was now drawing to a close, for, soon afterward, all of them went out, with the exception of Mat and Sol and Diana Temple.

After a minute or two of hesitating and rambling talk, Silver Sol was heard to say, with sudden decision:

"Likely I'll get a cussin' fer it, but I wish Miss Diana would jist make it clear what she was doin' up to Judge Gale's a while ago! I seen her talkin' to him in a room, and seen her giv' him a bag o' money. It struck me that the whole thing was thunderin' queer!"

Through a keyhole the Texan Detective could observe Diana's quick look of defiance.

"You was up there?" Mat asked, in some surprise.

"I was, and you ought to know why! I've been keeping a watch on Judge Gale for you and for the benefit of Silver Sol, who now accuses me of double dealing. As for that bag of money, there wasn't five dollars of it, altogether, and it was for Nancy Stackpole to buy her friendship."

Silver Sol was not to be downed so easily.

"I reckon I know a bagful o' money when I see it!"

She faced toward Mesquite.

"He knows, of course," nodding to Silver Sol, "that you shot the woman; and, knowing that, he ought to see, without any trouble, why I went there. Nancy Stackpole has been your friend, but, after that, it's mighty likely that she'll be your enemy!"

"It isn't the first time I've been to see her. I was there this morning, and took

her something nice to eat, which I said had come from you. Being a woman, I think I ought to know how to deal with a woman.

"It's easy to win her back, if we treat her right; if you don't treat her right and don't show that you are anxious about her and sorry, she'll turn against you and be as bitter as poison!"

Silver Sol was not satisfied with the explanation.

"Well, mebbe Mesquite is willin' to swaller a sweetened story like that, but I ain't!"

If Mat had been wavering, his wavering now vanished.

This attack was most indiscreet for Silver Sol.

"Git out o' this room, er I'll pitch ye out!" with a hot outburst. "If you hain't got no respect fer this hyar young woman I'll make ye have!"

Sol was a bigger man than Mesquite and more than a match for him in a fight, but the feeling of subordination was strong.

He stood for a moment, turning pale, then red; then blurted out:

"We've been friends a long time, Mesquite, but I don't 'low even a friend to step on me! Mebbe I spoke a little too quick; but, when I see a thing, I see it. If that young woman wasn't givin' you a double deal up there at Judge Gale's, then I hain't got no sense in the top o' my head!"

"Throw him out of the room!" Diana commanded. "I'll not sit here and be slandered in any such way. There's not a member of the band that has been more faithful than I have, and it's time he should know it!"

"I'll not row with ye!" Sol declared, backing toward the door; "but I've a right to my opinions, an' I tell ye now you can't browbeat me. When that young woman does ye up, you'll know then who was lyin'!"

Mat, urged on by the words of Diana, leaped toward the door as if he meant to assault Silver Sol, but the latter slipped into the passage and hurried from the house.

When the detective got into the street in front of the Corral, Silver Sol was nowhere to be seen.

After looking for him in the Corral and on the street, he abandoned the search for the night and went home.

As he drew near the house, he was surprised to see Silver Sol emerge from the shadows and come toward him.

"I want a word or two with you in ye'r room, if you're willin' to trust me that fur!"

"Perhaps I'll be willing to trust you farther than you'll be willing to trust me, Silver Sol!"

"I want to talk to you about Mesquite Mat—and—about the ring!"

He looked all around, as if he feared he might be seen or heard.

Some men were moving in the distance, and he plucked the detective's arm and pulled him out of the light.

"I'm givin' it to you straight. Me and Mesquite Mat have had a little row, an' I'm blest if I hain't goin' to git even with him!"

Hy Hiram caught Silver Sol's breath, which was hot with liquor.

To nerve him to the desperate and angry purpose he had hastily formed, Silver Sol had taken two or three stiff drinks.

"Now, lookie hyar," Hiram chirruped, "I've been fooled several times by men of your kidney, who tried to play friendly to me and then do me up. So, I give you fair warning! If you show any tricks, I'm not going to hold myself responsible for the consequences!"

"You're welcome to take charge of my gun and my toothpick, if you want 'em. I'm dealin' on the square with you!"

He drew out his revolver and knife and gave them to Hy Hiram, who coolly dropped them into one of his pockets.

"Very well, Silver Sol; I invite you to my room, where we can talk without so much danger of being seen or heard!"

He walked on, and Silver Sol dropped in at his heels.

When the room was reached, the outlaw detailed the conversation that had taken place between himself, Mesquite Mat and Diana, and detailed it correctly.

Then he made a deliberate offer to betray Mesquite Mat and the leaders of the Lone Stars; to denounce them publicly on the night before the election, and to become State's evidence to secure their conviction.

"One other thing," said the detective, checking him. "You know where Gladys Gale and the Sport from Spokane are held? I'm mighty sure you do!"

"They're held in the camp at Deadman's Canyon."

"Tell me how to reach it."

"I couldn't, so that it'd do ye any good. All I could do would be to guide ye there. I couldn't tell you, so's ye could go ye'rself."

This was evidently so, for, when he tried to give explicit directions, they were so confusing that the detective confessed a doubt of his ability to follow them.

Hiram returned to Silver Sol's promise to betray and denounce his comrades, and went over the particulars, item by item, that there might be no misunderstanding.

Sol was to come out boldly against his former confederates, on the evening before the election, and on the strength of his statements they were to be placed under arrest.

The Texan Detective felt that the game was now in his own hands.

Sol did not leave the room for more than an hour, and before he went out Hiram returned him his knife and pistol.

Hardly had he reached the street when a pistol shot sounded.

The detective rushed out through the corridor, being joined at the door by the clerk, and, at the foot of the steps, they found Silver Sol lying in the agonies of death.

A man was disappearing in the gloom, whom the detective believed to be Mesquite Mat, though he could not have sworn to it as a fact.

It was quite clear that some member of the Lone Star band had followed them, had become aware of Silver Sol's intended treachery, and had shot him from concealment, as he stepped out of the house.

A crowd quickly gathered and the excitement grew intense.

While it was at its height, Mesquite Mat appeared, elbowing his way forward. Sol was dead, and Mat pretended to be horrified.

"I denounce that man as the one who done it!" he cried, pointing to Hy Hiram. "He's the greatest enemy that Sol had in this town!"

But the evidence of the clerk took all the force out of this accusation and left the people as bewildered as ever.

The Texan Detective was the most distressed man there. His winning card had slipped through his fingers!

CHAPTER XLIX.

A BREAK FOR FREEDOM.

The coming of the four outlaws out of the side canyon just when the Sport from Spokane and Gladys Gale were beginning to feel sure they would be able to escape, was certainly disconcerting.

The fact that they were in advance of the outlaws was, however, full of hope.

The sport feared to race ahead, with Gladys, through the darkness, at break-neck speed, not knowing what precipice they might pitch over.

He hesitated for a moment, then leaped down from his horse and drew one of the revolvers he had taken from the guard.

"You will have to ride on," he urged, "while I hold them back. It is our best chance!"

"Can we not ride on together?"

"No, no! Neither could escape. Ride on, carefully, but as fast as you can. I'll give them a few shots and then follow you!"

The outlaws were coming up rapidly, and were already firing. The jets of flame leaping from their rifles and the

"ping" and "spat" of the bullets were very suggestive and threatening.

She gave her horse a cut with a switch and rode on into the darkness, shivering with dread as she approached each patch of gloom, not knowing but a chasm blocked the way.

The rattle of the rifles and revolvers caused her to draw rein.

The Sport from Spokane, standing behind his horse, his revolver thrust across the saddle, fired rapidly. The outlaws had halted by some rocks and were shooting back at him.

Even as she looked, she saw his horse stagger and fall, and saw him drop down behind it for shelter.

A loud yell from the outlaws told that they, too, knew the horse had been killed.

"I must save him!" she gasped.

Notwithstanding that her idea was a reckless one, she drew her horse quickly around, applied the whip, and raced back to the rescue of the daring man from Spokane.

The clatter of hoofs gave the outlaws warning that she was returning, and toward her they directed a portion of their fire.

But the Sport from Spokane was not wasting his time. He had emptied one revolver and was now using another, and from his position behind the horse—for he was much lower than they, and had them against the sky line—he was able to shoot with astonishing accuracy.

In less than two minutes he succeeded in killing a horse and in severely wounding two of the men.

The others abandoned the idea of a rush to capture the girl, and drew back behind the rocks for safety.

Gladys Gale, now wild with excitement, came up the rocky way like a whirlwind.

"Jump up here!" she called out, as she drew near.

And this the sport did, running to meet the horse, that no time might be lost.

Before the Lone Stars had recovered from the panic which the sport's deadly fire had created, he was on the strong horse ridden by Gladys, and, with her behind him, was flying down the path which she had lately traversed.

The ruffians came out from behind the rocks and began to fire rifles and pistols, but the darkness and distance kept them from execution, and in a little while the big horse had borne its riders beyond immediate danger.

Before they got out of the rougher portions of the hills, the horse began to exhibit signs of lameness, and an examination showed that he was slightly wounded. The wound was not serious, though the animal was not able to proceed at the rapid pace he had been going.

The sport dismounted and walked at the horse's head, with hand on the bridle rein, and in this manner they picked their way out of the hills and found themselves in the edge of the level country at the coming of day.

Of course, both were anxious to push on to Maverick City, but several considerations decided them on a delay. The distance was too great to be walked by Gladys, and the horse needed rest. They, too, needed rest and food.

The sport left her for a time, until he could find a place suited for a concealed camp.

He found the place sought, with an abundance of dry mesquite brush, and he likewise contrived to shoot a jack rabbit that sprang up in his way.

It was risky to build a fire, but, after he had conducted her and the horse to the camp, he took the risk, and the rabbit, toasted on sticks, furnished a good breakfast.

However, there was no water, and as they were forced to remain in that place until nearly noon, they suffered not a little from thirst.

The fact that they were together, had their liberty, and were on their way to home and friends, comforted them for the pain and inconvenience.

Of what did they not talk? Love and marriage was one of the subjects, the reader may be sure.

Another was the mystery which had surrounded some of Gladys' acts.

Very delicately the sport broached the questions of the fire she had started in the court house, her attempted assassination of Hy Hiram, and her flight from town.

She looked at him in amazement and horror.

"Did I really do those things?"

"You certainly did, my dear, though I knew at the time you were not responsible for your acts!"

"I was not responsible!" she avowed, solemnly and tearfully. "I must have been crazy! I was crazy! I have no recollection whatever of the things you state!"

Her earnestness could not be doubted, but while her words explained away the mystery to his satisfaction, they filled him with fears for her future sanity. Could he dare to marry a woman who might one day become the inmate of a lunatic asylum?

CHAPTER L.

DESPERATE MEASURES.

"She got so I had to shoot her!"

Mesquite Mat was talking to the Weasel, and the subject of the talk was Nancy Stackpole, who lay at the house of Judge Gale, hovering on the borderland between life and death.

"I thought I had done the job well, but she's come to herself, and they're tryin' to get her to tell who done it, an' all about it!"

Mesquite Mat was blissfully ignorant of the fact that the Texan Detective had heard his talk with the woman and had seen him shoot her.

"An' you know when she gits started the boys will all be in fer it, fer she'll tell the whole biz!"

"But what kin I do?"

"I want you to go up to Judge Gale's and stay there. Watch the house—her room—and if she gits to blabbin', stop her mouth!"

"But how can I stop her mouth, with all them folks in there?"

"I reckon you kin shoot yit, can't ye? Ef it comes to the worst an' ye can't stop her any other way, shoot her and skip."

The Weasel seemed to grow smaller, so great was his cringing.

"I tell you, Mesquite, I da'ssent!"

"But you've got to! There's no one else to do it, and it's got to be done. The whole jig's up if she once gits to blabbin'!"

The Weasel, now completely under Mesquite Mat's thumb, finally agreed to undertake the job.

Two or three drinks at the bar of the Corral strengthened his courage.

It was now the day before the election, and the interest of the two parties was at fever pitch.

As Weasel William slipped into the grounds surrounding Judge Gale's residence he resembled a snake or lizard more than anything else. He crept from shrub to shrub, getting flat on the ground when he came to more exposed places.

He had been told in which room Nancy Stackpole lay, and was trying to get as near to it as possible without discovery.

A broad veranda ran along that side of the house, and William at first thought he might conceal himself somewhere on that.

But as he drew near he found this would be impossible, as there was not the slightest thing behind which he could conceal himself, even if he could succeed in getting on the veranda.

Nancy's room was in the second story, so he finally decided to take his station on a large trellis, directly opposite her window.

This trellis had been put there at the solicitation of Gladys. It was now covered with a heavy trailing vine, which completely hid the cross-pieces around which it twined.

The Weasel saw that if he could once gain a position high enough to look into the sick room without detection, he would have a most favorable location for seeing, if not for hearing.

Keeping the trellis between himself and the house, he cautiously approached and began the ascent.

Once, when halfway up, he nearly lost his balance at the sound of a footstep, but when the sound ceased around the corner of the house, he climbed slowly on.

Finally he slipped a foot over one of the cross-pieces, drew the vines around his person as well as he could, and found himself in a good position to view the entire room. But, alas! he could hear nothing.

Nancy Stackpole was lying, pale and thin, on her bed before the open window, either asleep or unconscious. Beside her sat a plainly-dressed woman, evidently the wife of some laborer.

Thus hour after hour passed, with no more exciting occurrence than the slight rousing of Nancy, at which her nurse would give her either water or some soothing drops.

Once Judge Gale came into the room, but, after a close scrutiny of the patient and a few words to the nurse, he passed out, and all was again quiet.

The Weasel was becoming so cramped and tired he could hardly retain his seat, when every nerve was set tingling and his whole being roused by the entrance of a party into the room.

This party consisted of Judge Gale, Hy Hiram, and two other men, whom Weasel William instantly recognized as the doctor and a prominent attorney of Maverick City.

Still Nancy Stackpole slept.

The spy in the vines fingered his revolver nervously, then commenced slipping cautiously to the ground.

"I've got to git outter that there plazer!"

The sun had set and the short twilight was fast fading into the darkness of a cloudy night.

The Weasel reached the ground, slipped across the intervening space and commenced "shinning" up one of the veranda supports.

He found this hard work, but he was lithe and wiry, and finally dropped, tired and breathless, on the upper floor.

As soon as he could regain his breath he slid up to the window and peeped in.

He was not a moment too soon.

Nancy Stackpole was being raised to a half-sitting posture, while the doctor stood with a medicine glass in his hand.

"This will give her some strength and rouse her to her senses," he was saying.

The lawyer sat at a table drawn close to the bed, with writing paper, pens and ink spread out before him.

Again that pistol was in Weasel William's hand, but again was it lowered to his pocket.

"The other's safest," he muttered, as he stooped below the window sill and began fishing things from a capacious pocket.

He soon had a small pile of nicely cut shavings, over which he poured the contents of a vial.

Then, applying a match, he scudded across the veranda and slid rapidly to the ground.

He fell in a heap, but was almost instantly on his feet, screaming at the top of his voice.

"Fire! Fire! Fire!"

CHAPTER LI.

NANCY STACKPOLE'S CONFESSION.

It was a case of from the frying-pan into the fire with the Weasel.

Before his wild cry had left his lips he was seized by the collar and dragged fiercely to the ground.

"I generally know that, whenever you interest yourself in this family, there's some devilment afloat!"

The words came in the voice of Caleb Strong!

He and Gladys Gale had broken camp near noon of that day, after having given the horse a thorough rest, and had reached Maverick City, after a long and tiresome journey. The sport had walked, thus relieving the horse as much as possible.

They had come into the grounds of

Judge Gale's residence just as Weasel William sang out his alarm of fire.

The alarm brought the men from Nancy Stackpole's room hurrying to the upper veranda.

Finding the fire before it had time to spread, they soon had it scattered and all danger removed.

In his haste to distract attention from Nancy Stackpole's confession, the Weasel had not thoroughly done his work.

As Judge Gale turned to re-enter the house, talking excitedly, he stopped, stared, and then cried:

"Gladys, my daughter!"

Gladys had hurried up-stairs as soon as she entered the house from below, and now threw herself into her father's arms.

"How came you here? Who set this fire?" were Judge Gale's questions.

But Gladys was sobbing and could not answer, and, half lifting her, the judge led the way back into the sick room.

Nancy Stackpole sat erect, her eyes shining, her breath coming in quick gasps.

The doctor stepped forward, administered a quieting draught, and she sank back on her pillow.

"Will you tell me the truth?" she said, in a weak, but distinct voice. "Is there any hope of my ever getting well?"

"I fear there is none," was the quiet answer.

Nancy Stackpole covered her face with her hands, but when she again looked up there was a stern resolve in her eyes.

"I cannot die with this on my mind. I will tell all I know!"

The lawyer took his seat again at the table, and Nancy began her confession.

"I have known—and loved—Matthew Moriarty, or Mesquite Mat, for years. Back East he was known as Dan Creegan, but he was pretty much the same kind of a man there that he is here.

"When this political fight came on he sent me to the judge's house to watch and do what I could to help the gang.

"After I'd been hyar a while I found I could work Miss Gladys. I've practiced hypnotism before, an' when she got me to tellin' her fortune I found I could get her in my power. I hypnotized her an' made her do that devilment!

"I s'pose I ought to be sorry for it all, but I'm afraid it's too late fer that now. I wish I could see Mat!"

She told of various crimes of the gang, and soon after sank into a stupor, from which she never aroused.

Caleb Strong forced the Weasel into a corner by the door, and heard all that Nancy had to say.

When she became quiet, he called Judge Gale's attention to his capture, and the whole party retired to another room, leaving Nancy with her nurse.

Here Gladys told what had befallen her in the camp of the outlaws, and of her rescue and release by Caleb Strong.

Gladys admitted that she had gone many times to Nancy Stackpole to have her fortune told—that she and Nancy had played at spirit rappings—that Nancy had often "read her mind"; but she protested that she never dreamed there was any danger to herself in these things. They had merely served to amuse idle hours. Now she was astonished to know that the woman had led her on, and had deliberately worked the whole thing to obtain hypnotic influence over her.

"What are we to do with the Weasel?" broke in the Sport from Spokane, more to cover Gladys' confusion than for any other purpose.

"He must be held!" decided Hy Hiram. "If released, he'll go straight to Mesquite Mat with this story! Can't he be kept here?"

Judge Gale announced that he had a small upper room which would serve well as a temporary prison, and to this room the now thoroughly scared Weasel was conducted. There he was locked in and a guard placed to watch him.

CHAPTER LII.

DIANA TEMPLE UNMASKS.

At almost the same hour that these things were occurring at the residence of

Judge Gale, Mesquite Mat and Diana Temple were conversing in the small parlor of the boarding house where she stayed.

He called on her there almost every evening, even though they met frequently during the daylight hours in other places.

No man was ever more completely led captive. Anthony never made more of a fool of himself for the sorceress of the Nile.

"We've got 'em!" was his jubilant declaration. "Ter-morrow we're sure to win. I don't see now what kin hinder us! Unless—"

"Unless what, dear?" drawing closer and putting a hand on his shoulder. "Is there any doubt on the subject?"

"I was thinkin' of Nancy! I'd feel a good deal easier in my mind if I knowed she was dead. I'm afraid the Weasel may slip up on that job, for it's a desperate chance, at best."

She slid the hand further up on his shoulder, and put an arm around his neck in a caressing way.

"I wonder if you'll ever think that about me?"

"Never!" he declared, with fervor.

"Men are such deceivers, you know! When you talk that way about Nancy it makes me shiver, thinking you may feel so about me after a while. I'll not be always as young and good-looking as I am now, you must remember."

She was certainly good looking on this evening. Some hidden excitement made her eyes shine like stars, and, as for apparel, she had never been more radiantly dressed.

She was much overdressed, in truth, but Mesquite's taste ran to loudness of color effects, and she chose her clothing to suit him.

She was undeniably painted, too—painted like a Jezebel! But the paint and powder had been applied so deftly that it was not noticeable to the purblind lover.

"I hope you'd never think of going back on me, like she done!" he growled. "If you should do that, why, I sha'n't promise that I'd jest be tickled to death about it!"

She changed her position and drew his hands into her lap, patting them soothingly. They were hard and sinewy—sinewy enough to crush her smaller ones.

"You're feeling bad to-night. Maybe to-morrow night you'll feel better."

"Look toward the window, but don't move! I thought I saw a shadow there!"

She whispered the words, still clinging to his hands, as if in their strength she sought protection.

Mesquite, muttering an imprecation, looked.

At the same instant he heard an ominous click and felt his wrists encircled with cold steel.

She had deftly handcuffed him.

"What in thunder does that mean?"

He dragged himself half out of the chair, and, glaring at her, lifted the manacled hands as if he would smite her to the floor.

"What d'ye mean by that, Diana? Are you playin' with me, or be ye in earnest? Take the things off!"

For answer she quickly upthrust the little revolver which she always carried.

His bewilderment gave way to a fury of rage, and, fairly frothing at the mouth, he again lifted his hands, and tried to strike her.

But she was far too nimble for him. Evading the blow by deft dodging, she came quickly up behind him and snatched his revolver out of his pocket.

Then she called loudly for help.

In reply, two men, who had been stationed in the corridor, rushed into the room and confronted the baffled and wrathful outlaw.

"Jist as well take it easy, Mesquite Mat!"

One of them covered him with a revolver from the doorway.

"You've played ye'r little game and the end's come, and ter-morrer is the 'lection!"

For an instant it seemed that Mat contemplated hurling himself through the

window to the ground below, but Diana interposed between him and that.

He saw that he was in the toils, and sank, groaning, into a chair.

"I wish you'd tell me what's the matter with ye?" looking at her with a look that was puzzled and anxious. "Air you as bad as Nancy?"

For answer she stepped behind the door, and when she came into view again the bright feminine garments had disappeared and Diana stood revealed as a young man—scarcely more than a boy.

"You thought I was masquerading when I went about as a young man, but it was when I played Diana Temple that I masqueraded. I am a man, and my name is Guy Gale. I am a son of Judge Gale!"

Mesquite Mat was hardly able to believe the statement; he fancied he must be dreaming—that this was some horrid nightmare, from which he would soon waken.

But the actions of Guy Gale and of the men who had been in waiting effectually dispelled any such comforting illusions.

He had been betrayed! And when Guy showed him the wig of long hair which he had often smoothed, thinking it genuine, he frothed again like a mad dog.

"I'll kill you yit!" he hissed. "I'll live to kill you! I never thought—"

"You never thought you could be so cleverly fooled!"

The published confession of Nancy Stackpole, the news that Diana Temple was but another detective masquerading, and that Mesquite Mat and Weasel William were under arrest, threw the Lone Stars into such consternation that they made no attempt to rally at the polls on the morning of the day of election.

Those who had most to fear fled from Maverick City, and the Lone Stars, as an organization, ceased to exist.

The gems that Mesquite Mat had given to Guy Gale, and which Guy had transferred to his father for safe keeping, were turned into the treasury of the county, in repayment of what Mat's band had taken.

Mesquite Mat and the Weasel, with some half dozen others who had been Lone Star leaders, were given long terms of imprisonment as proper punishment for their heinous crimes, and their conviction—the power of the band having been utterly broken—was not a difficult matter.

Gladys Gale, in due time, became the wife of Caleb Strong, the Sport from Spokane; and the sport, the judge and the judge's son, became a triumvir, who ruled the city, and the county, in fact, wisely and well.

As for Hy Hiram, having done his work as a detective, he sought pastures new, and, in the pursuit of criminals, the puppy dog still chirruped and the Adam's apple bobs up and down like a cork on the line angling for "scaly" game.

THE END.

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